BEHIND THE SCENES: RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN: THE TIDES OF WAR

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PlayStation 2

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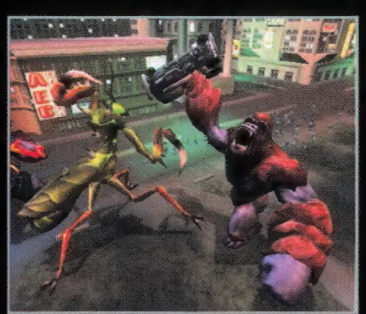

PlayStation.2

LIVE IN YOUR W×RLD.
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out of focus

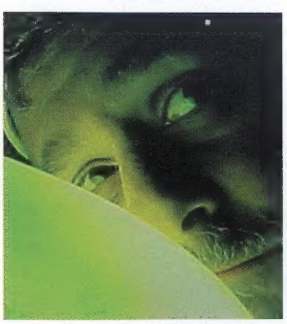
There's so much to talk about I don't know where to begin, but seeing how we've been whining like a Raiders fan on Super Sunday about the dearth of a backlit Game Boy Advance, I guess the new SP would be a good place to start. How about this: Nintendo finally steps up and answers our prayers; now 2D gaming really is back. You can read all about it in this month's Ink, along with the announcement that NEC has rejoined the fray (on the software side at least). The people who brought us all of those wonderful 16-bit firsts (first 16-bit console, CD-ROM and handheld) are back in action. No news yet on whether or not we'll see our old friend Bonk, but I've got everything crossed that will.

News revelations aside, what I really want to address this month is whether or not the dumbing down of today's games is ultimately a good idea or one that's gonna bite third parties right back in the ass. I bring it up for two reasons: the delay of Malice while it goes through "focus testing," and the big red arrows placed throughout Vexx. On Malice, it seems that all of the great press it has enjoyed thus far (thanks in no small part to yours truly, lover of all things jumpy) may become the bane of its existence. First Sierra got No Doubt on board: 'k, no worries there. But as a result, what was billed and built as a hardcore platformer must now live up to "mainstream" (short for "now nobody will buy it") scrutiny. How do you take a skills-based Argonaut platformer and turn it into an everyman's (and woman's) experience? Well, I just pray they can somehow strike the correct balance going in after the fact. It would be a shame to squander this game on a pre-teen user probably buying it more for the Gwen-play than the gameplay. So, the jury's out there—stay tuned. Next up, another game we did a cover on, Vexx—a game literally based on discovery—has received arrows that, depending on the goal (of which there are 9-10 per world), point you in the right direction, making it impossible to get lost—which was originally the whole idea behind the game.

Wouldn't it be better to just design easy games separate from the hardcore stuff? Hell, pin a soundtrack and celeb name to any 3D action game and save the development budget. Let there be easy games, but don't mess with multi-million-dollar epics created for hardcore gamers, after the fact... What is this, Hollywood? It reminds me of the orgy scenes ripped out of *Eyes Wide Shut*...it's such bullshit. If a game is too hard, let people buy a strategy guide and get better—just get these f***ing arrows out of my face! That said, ignore them in Vexx; it's a cool game, especially on Xbox and GameCube. The funny thing is that once you arrive via the arrows, the game's pretty hard in places; nothing like a little real-time contradiction.

The result of these types of compromises can only lead to disenchanting the enthusiast who ultimately has and always will support this industry. Casual users come and go, so to shape gaming around their whims (and keep them from the satisfaction of getting better), well, it's the wrong road. There are plenty of easy and/or alternative games to be had; leave our platformers alone. I'd love to hear your views on this subject, so...you know where to find me.

"Is the dumbing down of today's games ultimately a good idea or one that's gonna bite third parties right back in the ass?"



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COVER STORY
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER
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playback

letters@playmagazine.com

write and win!

If we choose your correspondence as our "letter of the month", you'll receive a one year subscription to **play** magazine gratis. Give us your best thoughts.

letter of the month

Ok, here's a scenario for you - Shinobi. Apparently a very difficult game. Not long by any means, but the difficulty level should have kept me at it for a while right? I beat the thing in 10 hours (including all extras attained by getting all the secret symbols in each level and getting an A - sometimes B ranking on all the levels). I didn't find it difficult at all really. And I really didn't feel like playing through again on a harder difficulty, simply because the same 'find bad guys, kill bad guys, find boss, kill boss' gameplay kinda wore thin, especially once I had encountered all the enemy designs the game had to offer. (I will admit playing through the game as the original Shinobi was fun for a few levels though). Anyway, I've heard that this game is fairly short too - I was wondering how difficult you figured it was (IYO of course). Sorry I'll try and make the next question shorter. One of your reviews that I remember most was of the original Tomb Raider for the PSX awhile back. (What a great year for games that was huh? Mario 64, Crash Bandicoot, and Tomb Raider all in one year...wow). Anyway, the first TR was a magic title that I enjoyed tremendously. After TR2, the franchise took a dive (it was at TR3 IMO, some might say TR2 was the beginning of the decline) and I've been hoping for a return of the magic that I felt with the first game. Now, I've read previews upon previews for the upcoming TR game, and none of them has been able to tell me what I need to know. Some have tiptoed around the question, others have outright ignored it. So I turn to you, the guy that wrote my favorite review of the game (if only because it matched my own opinion so thoroughly, it seemed you were writing down MY feelings of the game) and I ask you one simple question: From the experience you've had with the unfinished game thus far would you say that this Tomb Raider is on track to deliver the same kind of magic as the first TR? Or, a simpler way of asking it - have the unfinished 'demos' been FUN to play?

Sascha Lichtenstein

We were actually pretty surprised when we started hearing (and reading) that Shinobi was supposedly a hard game. Contra SS is hard...Shinobi becomes somewhat challenging at around the halfway mark. The ability to begin anew facing a given boss, if you don't kill it the first time, we thought was a generous gesture on the part of OverWorks and kept the game flowing nicely. We've all been playing games a decade or more though so, maybe that has something to do with it. I think your evaluation of the game is dead on by the way. Wait 'til you see Ninja Gaiden on Xbox...That's the new Shinobi we wanted. Still, it was a solid, smooth action game with some nasty bosses, a cool new slice and dice system, and an unforgettable player model. On Tomb Raider, it's funny you should ask, seeing as how it was supposed to be this month's cover story. Eidos pulled out just a week to close when they delayed the game yet again. The plan was to write a story based on having a cohesive playable, but the game never came... What we've seen and played so far equates to bits and pieces. The stints playing as that Kurtis dude kind of scare us, but otherwise we're hoping Core can recapture some of that old Lara magic. The mystique of the original has never found its way back to the franchise. With any luck, we'll have a disc in time to bring you the full story next month. We did manage some new shots however on page 38.

"The first Tomb Raider was a magic title that I enjoyed tremendously, and I've been hoping for a return of the magic..."

Hug This!

I'm not one to slam somebody for their opinions, but I have to take issue with one letter-writer in the January issue (the letter titled "Xbox Huggers"). I really can't stand that "my favorite system is the best and everything else sucks" mentality. Of course it's fine to have your favorites, but I've always felt that "a true gamer" (as he boasts that he is) should be open-minded and avail him/herself to as diverse a selection of games as possible, and in order to do that, you have to grow up and not take shots at another system for its "nasty aliases" and the way the console looks. Shutting yourself off from a wide selection of fantastic games just because you decided not to buy that system is NOT the mark of "a true gamer." I would think a true gamer would want to get his hands dirty, his feet wet, and experience as much of the world of video games as humanly possible -- I know I do, and I have done so for the past 23 years. Now let's shut up and play something fun, whether it's Pong or Panzer Dragoon Orta.

TJ Rappel

Damn PS2 Huggers!!

No Likey the Website...

I feel like I partially know you (only gaming-wise...I'm no stalker) from reading your various magazines in years past. Being that I'm 30, we're from somewhat the same generation of gamers, and our tastes in games mesh somewhat. Let me say this first: I enjoy "Play", and the quality of the magazine shows through quite easily. You (collectively) care about games, and specifically, many games that I care about.

That being said, after having waited for "Play" to get online for such a long time, why is it such a hideously slow site for news and such? To wit, I've been chomping at the bit for more Treasure news since the release of Ikaruga (my first import, ever), and since I'm such a big fan of theirs, I thought for *sure* that "Play" would have some news on what Treasure has been up to besides the new Wario game for the GC. BTW, I'm absolutely relieved that Treasure wasn't acquired by Nintendo. Ugh...the things that would happen then.

Anyway, I honestly was shocked (Shocked, I say!) when I surfed over to another site and took a look at their news, and guess what? They had coverage of Konami's Gamers Day. Inside, there was info about Gradius V, developed by none other than, guess who? Now, I am *dead sure* that what I just told you isn't news to you. I'm sure you knew all this well before I read it, or even before Konami's Gamer's Day. What I'm wondering is why there's no mention of it in the latest issue of "Play" (more than likely because of lead-time), and in that absence, why is there absolutely NOTHING on the website? Here's hoping that the website starts posting some relatively relevant news in the near future.

Aron

The last two places I worked, they burned so much money trying to build a web presence it became one of the key factors in their demise. The problem with running a site like IGN or Ziff is that no matter how much we spent, we could only hope to be as good, and that doesn't make good business sense. It's impossible to make money online, so, for us, it's just not an option. Our site is more of a review archive at the moment. In the future we do have plans to make it something more (we have many great ideas) but it'll probably be another few months before the real Play Online launches. It'll be small and niche, but it won't break the bank and we guarantee it'll offer something fresh. On Treasure, we're so frustrated. In the past we'd just pick up the phone and send a correspondent on down for all the scoops. We've dealt directly with Maegawa for over a decade. Unfortunately, though they can no longer show "favoritism" so we have to go through "proper channels". We're working on those channels now but it's slow going...

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ink

news trends gossip assorted nonsense

LIGHT FANTASTIC

At last, the world's most popular console becomes truly [illegible]

It has finally happened. The lit Game Boy Advance is now a reality. No more cheap, clip-on lights that ruin the aesthetic of the system and weigh it down, and no more tricky hacks which are not worth the time it takes to install them. No, no, this is the real deal, and all we can say is it was worth the wait.

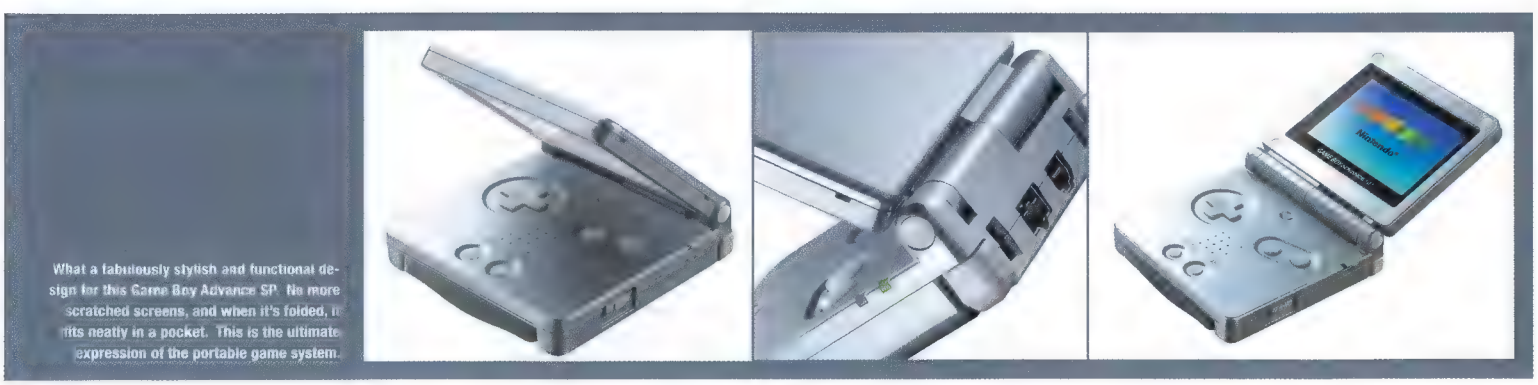
No doubt, this is one of the sexiest things that Nintendo has ever designed. Upon its unveiling, many thought it looked more like a Sony product than a Nintendo one, and we think it was intentional that the silver model was shown off first. It has the look of a piece of consumer electronics, not a game machine, and this could help the system reach a whole new realm of gamers. Not that we've ever had a problem with Nintendo's industrial design in the past, but we welcome their decision to try something new.

But of course, there has been no trading of style for function. If anything, the function has increased. Most significantly, the fact that the system can now be closed shut means that the screen will always be protected when not in use, and that its viewing angle can be easily adjusted relative to the controls. And as you can see, the basic button layout has not been compromised in any way, making it basically the ideal portable system.

As for the details, it boasts a lithium ion battery, which is more efficient and doesn't suffer from the memory effects of old-fashioned nickel cadmium batteries. With the light switched on, at least 10 hours of gameplay are promised from a three hour charge, with that number almost doubling to 18 with the light off. An adapter is required for headphone use, but inter-system and Gamecube link cables remain the same.

The Game Boy Advance SP goes on sale March 23rd for $99. Run, don't walk.

"This is one of the sexiest things Nintendo has ever designed. It has the look of a piece of consumer electronics"

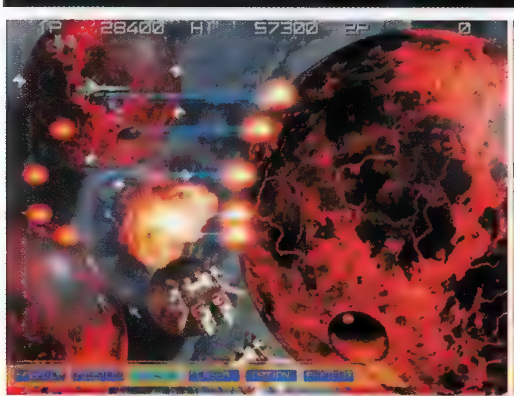


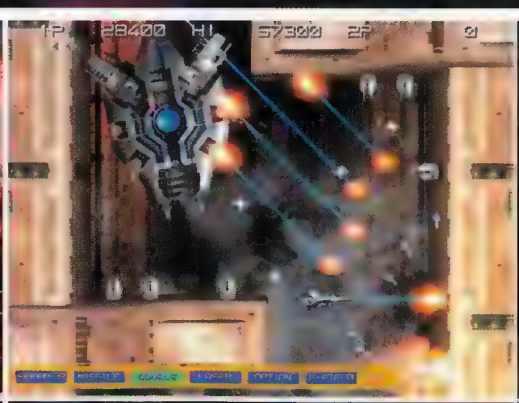
What a fabulously stylish and functional design for this Game Boy Advance SP. No more scratched screens, and when it's folded, it fits neatly in a pocket. This is the ultimate expression of the portable game system.

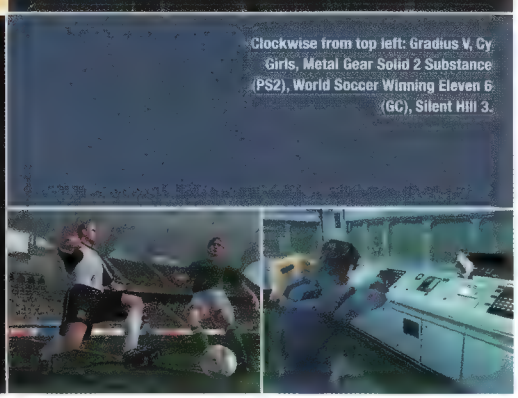
KONAMI 2003

Legends, new and old, adorn the house that Simon built

The franchises that defined gaming as we know it are coming back (again) in 2003. At Konami's Gamers' Day, held this past January in San Francisco, no less than 16 games were featured, including many from our favorite series. Seemingly out of nowhere, Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow for GBA was announced — so flip to the previews section for more info. Sadly, Konami wouldn't comment on rumors of a PS2/GC Castlevania, but advised us to stay tuned for...something. Just as shocking was the debut of Gradius V. With Treasure (yes, I said Treasure) at the helm, and 3D visuals complimenting the classic 2D play, shooter fans will finally have a game to dig into. Konami also reaffirmed that they will be bringing the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles back to gaming come October. They weren't ready to be seen yet, but look for 'em on Xbox, GC, PS2, PC, and GBA. (We're still hoping for a GBA port of the '89 arcade game...) The acquisitions of Bloody Roar (Xbox), Pinobee (PS1), and McFarlane Monsters (PS2) came as a surprise, while Cy Girls (PS2), DDRMAX2 (PS2), K-1 World Grand Prix (PS2), Ninja Five-O (GBA), Street Kings (basketball on PS2 and GC), World Soccer Winning Eleven 6 International (PS2), and Casino Manager (PC) flesh out the list. Konami also showed the latest of some high-profile PS2 sequels: MGS2: Substance, Zone of the Enders: The 2nd Runner (check elsewhere this ish) and Silent Hill 3. Look for more coverage on these titles as soon as it's available!







Clockwise from top left: Gradius V, Cy Girls, Metal Gear Solid 2 Substance (PS2), World Soccer Winning Eleven 6 (GC), Silent Hill 3.

THEY'RE BACK!

NEC Interchannel, Ltd., a subsidiary of NEC Corporation, has announced its plans to enter the gaming industry as a third-party publisher for the PS2, GameCube, GBA and Xbox!

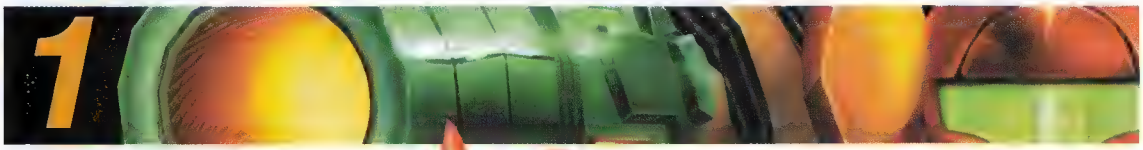
Headed by former senior vice-president of Capcom Entertainment, Inc., Clint Kurahashi, NEC Interchannel expects to release its first product in February 2003, a futuristic racing title for the Nintendo GameCube entitled Tube Slider. (Okay you cheeky monkeys, simmer down now.)

For the uninitiated, back in '89 — the birth of 16-bit (only the best time ever to be alive) — NEC launched the TurboGrafx-16, the first console in the US market to feature 16-bit graphics processing. They also launched the first CD console and the first 16-bit handheld, were host to the launch of the Street Fighter brand, and set the stage for role-playing with Y's... Not to mention their then-mascot, Bonk, NEC's answer to Sonic: currently the most-wanted update in the free world. If he makes a comeback I'll kiss this Clint dude flush on the...well, we'll just give him a cover.

READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

Apparently, brilliant minds think alike.

We are humbled by the wisdom of the **play** reader. Only patrons of this magazine are skilled enough in the ways of true gaming to place two first-party Nintendo epics in the top spots. Vice City is certainly a force to be reckoned with though, as evidenced by its storming 3rd place finish. The two biggest shockers however, are Ty the Bilby and BloodRayne. We're overjoyed that Blinx found a home with platforming fans, and BloodRayne, although rough around the edges, showed much potential in her debut.



Honorable Mention Gun Valkyrie / **Import Game of the Year** Ikaruga

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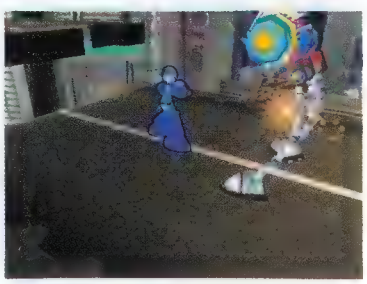
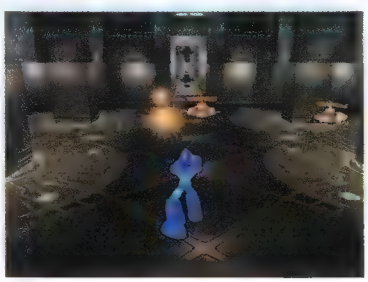
CAPCOM DOES VEGAS

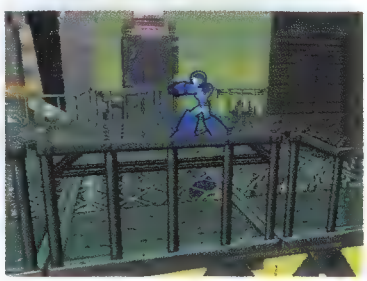
Capcom unleashes its big action games for 2003

How do you avoid losing money, sleep and good taste while enjoying a stay in the City of Sin? Simple: head over to the Capcom press event where so many games are on display that the only form of entertainment you need is the excitement of a controller. Vegas was the place this month to see almost too many Capcom games to even mention. In a roundtable of discussion and gameplay, a handful of editors enjoyed several exciting new announcements while getting a first-hand look at some of the best Capcom has been hinting at for months now. Resident Evil 4 was still on video, but looked absolutely stunning and filled with awesome frights and macabre sights. There was a lot of mention of pure, fast-paced play, the importance of Capcom returning to its revered action roots. A good start was Mega Man X7, which thankfully has discarded full 3D for a more restricted, tightly structured environment. Mega Man is of course a huge Capcom staple, and his 15th anniversary—christened with a birthday cake—means much more to come: Mega Man Battle Network 3 White and Blue, Mega Man Zero 2, Mega Man Network Transmission and Mega Man & Bass. Dead Phoenix looked amazing, smacking of Devil May Cry intensity in a mythic world of winged creatures and ethereal

Clockwise from top left: Chaos Legions, Megaman X7, P.N.O. 3







BIO MOORE PETER...

The best thing to happen to Sega since Tom Kalinski's reign, President and CEO Peter Moore, who played an integral role in the launch of the Dreamcast and played a major role in transitioning the company from hardware manufacturer to an independent content publisher, has, sadly, left the building and taken up residence at...Microsoft (!) as their new Corporate Vice President of Retail Sales and Marketing. As such, he'll oversee Europe and Japan's Xbox console biz as well as Xbox & PC software. Sega meanwhile, is said to be entering a new phase of focused long-term growth and profitability. Tetsu Kayama, chief operating officer of Sega Corporation, has assumed the role of president and chief executive officer of SoA and is focused on keeping the roll going in Sega's bid to become a leading independent content publisher (of which we believe they're doing quite well). Peter is a great friend to play and we're sad (actually really sad) to see him go, but we wish him all the best at his new post.

imagery. Killer 7 showed off raw flavor and graphic violence in a stylized cell-shaded underworld of crime. For fun originality and crazy side-scrolling gameplay, Viewtiful Joe boasts the design touches of Steel Battalion producer Atsushi Inaba and Resident Evil 2 and Devil May Cry director Hideki Kamiya.

The old-west flavored Red Dead Revolver was finally playable, as was the very impressive, very exciting Dino Crisis 3. Resident Evil is going the way of online and gun-gaming with RE Online and RE Dead Aim, and the evil of Clock Tower 3 chilled, but perhaps the biggest eye-opener Capcom had on display was the "gothic opera" Chaos Legion. Also very cool was the unique P.N. O3, which pits you as a cold female soldier who leads her attacks with balletic dance moves. Looking to grab the Gran Turismo spirit and establish Capcom as competent racing coders was Group S Challenge, a racing sim with fantastic visuals.

No one will mind if you play naked.

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LIVE IN YOUR WORLD.
PLAY IN OURS.

3DO, JAGUAR...PHANTOM?!

Is it even real?

Hmm...obviously a render...and a sad one at that

Er, is it just me or does this thing look like a recycled 3DO... Yes, someone in this world has large enough cajones to launch a game console in the wake of Sony, Nintendo, and Microsoft, in a market as saturated as a Deee-Lite video. Infinium Labs Corp., claim they're about to "Take game performance to its highest level — bundled with more games than any competitor" with The Phantom (that name truly says it all), a new game console they claim will outperform the XBOX, PS2, and GameCube. Here's the scoop as stated in the press release: the company plans to market a high-performance gaming console and delivery system to provide consumers with options and capabilities that are not available in today's marketplace. The console will appeal to the hard-core gamer and the high-end consumer electronic purchaser. This next generation game console provides a robust, fault-tolerant delivery system and is an "ALWAYS ON BROADBAND DEVICE." It is easy enough for children to use independently yet so advanced it exceeds the needs of hard-core gamers.

The Infinium Labs game console features a high tech design (I love high-tech design!) and offers ease of use for the variety of game players worldwide. The on-demand delivery system will appeal to hard-core gamers as well as casual users. The unique design architecture allows for delivery of a large number of games and the ability to participate in online massive multiplayer gaming. The Phantom's features include: fastest console on the market, the broadest selection of preloaded games, cross-platform capabilities (?), state-of-the-art design and architecture, advanced accessories and wireless capabilities, online connectivity for multi-player gaming, seamless upgrades and patch management, a multi-tiered subscription service that meets the needs of casual, moderate and hard-core game players, the ability to demo games before purchasing or subscribing, games on demand, and game rentals. All this and it's not even April. As well, the advanced system provides game developers and publishers a secure and efficient software distribution system. Infinium Labs intends for game developers and publishers to reap greater profits using this new game delivery system. Infinium Labs has engineered its prototypes and expects to unveil the Phantom in March of 2003 and launch by November 2003... Look out Jaguar!

GWEN'S MALICE COMING OUT?

We've been getting quite a bit of mail regarding the whereabouts of a certain redhead named Malice — here's the scoop. In a move that punctuates today's whiny media circles, upon completion, Malice was handed over for focus testing to representatives of the teen demo it's supposed to lure in. Get a Gwen, better make it mainstream. Funny...we thought it was for gamers. Of course, the verdict was "too hard!" And so, Malice is back in the shop getting dumbed down. Hey, after four years, don't we want Argonaut's latest masterpiece to be a walkthrough? Why bother, like, dying and shit? People have mall shopping to do, and like, VH1 has this totally cool rock bodies special on. With any luck, Malice won't become this generation's Evil Twin. But we jest, sort of. Universal promises the game won't suffer from the tweaks. We hope they're right. As far as Evil Twin goes...the reviewable PS2 disc is sitting right next to our copy of Thrill Kill ...although the PC version is still slated for release this summer.

READY TO RUMBLE!

If you want a wireless Nintendo pad but your partial to the joys of the rumble...here's your solution, courtesy of Pelican. The G3 Wireless operates on three "AA"s (generously included) has a 50ft. range (so you can like un-pause from the toilet and freak out the dog) and even comes with a generous Turbo feature. So now your free and shakin', just in time for Wind Waker!

THE YEAR THAT WAS

NPD just released their sales data for 2002, and sitting at the top spot is GTA: Vice City. No surprise there. But what's Mario doing at number 10? Times have unfortunately changed.

1. Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
PS2/Rockstar Games
2. Grand Theft Auto 3
PS2/Rockstar Games
3. Madden NFL 2003
PS2/Electronic Arts
4. Super Mario Advance 2
GBA/Nintendo
5. Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec
PS2/Sony
6. Medal of Honor FrontLine
PS2/Electronic Arts
7. Spider-Man: The Movie
PS2/Activision
8. Kingdom Hearts
PS2/Square
9. Halo **Xbox/Microsoft**
10. Super Mario Sunshine
GC/Nintendo

WELCOME TO MY NIGHTMARE...

Kalisto pass the torch, and a new nightmare begins

Hunched-over axe-wielding psychos rejoice! Ubi Soft has acquired all developing and publishing rights related to Nightmare Creatures 3: Angel of Darkness (WT), the next game in the gothic, action/adventure trilogy, as well as the Nightmare Creatures trademark. The development for Nightmare Creatures 3, started by Kalisto Entertainment, is now being handled by Ubi Soft and is slated for a 2004 cross-platform release. From what we've gathered, Ubi will also be taking some liberty with the title, adding a bit of the old Ubi magic to the proceedings, which could be scarier than the game itself. Wispy curly-queue clouds and good-natured fun are not in the NC credo. It's a game about freaks driven to the brink, bludgeoning, killing, chopping, spurting...they should call Marilyn Manson today for some ideas. We're sure they know that though, so we're focusing on what, say, the Rayman 3 team might bring to a gothic slaughter fest. This could be — should be — bloody magnificent. The related jargon went like this: "With the rights to the Nightmare Creatures name now secured, we are making sure that players remain as enthusiastic about the series as they have been up until now," said Alain Corre, Ubi Soft's Managing Director for Europe, Asia-Pacific and South America. "The action-packed gameplay and fascinating story of Nightmare Creatures 3 promise to take the fright factor of the genre to new heights." Er, whatever, dude...just make it real bloody and evil - k? Set in 19th-century central Europe, Nightmare Creatures 3 lets players slip into the role of an agile heroine who works to solve a mystery in Prague during the day, and by night merges with her accompanying raven to become a fighting creature. Sign us up!

"Best on the block" doesn't mean much anymore.

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LIVE IN YOUR WORLD.
PLAY IN OURS.

989 Sports Eighth Annual Game Before the Game

EIGHT AND @$!! 0!!!

Charles Haley, Edgar Bennet, Terrell Davis, John Mobley, Marshall Faulk, Qadry Ismail, Troy Brown and Keenan McCardell. What do these players have in common? Sure they are all players of Super Bowl winning teams but more importantly they were all champions of 989 Sports' Game Before The Game. But what's important to note here is 989 Sports' record. Ever since the Game Before The Game began back in 1996, whoever has won the event, wins the Super Bowl. With the Tampa Bay Buccaneers winning Super Bowl XXXVII, 989 Sports has a perfect 8-0 record. So you gotta wonder, could the Game Before The Game actually be able to predict the outcome of the Super Bowl? Lynn Swann called the Game Before The Game the "leading Super Bowl indicator." The record speaks for itself. As Don Cheadle would say, "This Game Before The Game? 8-0? That's crazy!"

What is the Game Before The Game? Imagine taking a player from each of the respective NFC and AFC Championship teams and pitting them against each other in a Super Bowl preview. Playing NFL GameDay 2003, this year's match-up included Charlie Garner, running back from the Oakland Raiders, and Keenan McCardell, wide receiver from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Calling the action this year was Hall of Famer Lynn Swann and Pat O'Brien from Access Hollywood. The event was held at the super trendy W, official Sony PlayStation hotel of Super Bowl XXXVIII.

EA Sports has a similar event during the week of Super Bowl as well. Simply called the Madden Bowl, it is a round-robin tournament to see which NFL player is the best at playing Madden. Having attended some Madden Bowls in the past, we have to say there is really no sense of excitement at their events –mainly because it features players from a variety of teams (and not necessarily the Super Bowl teams). And how much fun can it be watching other people play video games for a couple of hours? Sure there are celebs there watching and playing as well, but truly there is no comparison to 989 Sports' Game Before The Game.

This year's Game Before The Game played just like the Super Bowl in that the Tampa Bay Buccaneers trounced over the Oakland Raiders. And just like the real Super Bowl, it wasn't pretty. Keenan McCardell not only showed his prowess in passing and running, but his defense was unmatched. Although Garner had some key plays, including two long passes to Jerry Rice and a two-point conversion, it still wasn't enough going against the NFL's number one defense. In the end, Keenan McCardell won the Game Before The Game with a blowout score of 28-8. Trista Rehn (ABC's *The Bachelorette*) was on hand to pass out the trophy to Keenan. "I was in the zone the whole game," exclaims McCardell. "It's all about the defense. I kept blitzing and he didn't know what to do." Of course Charlie Garner had a different opinion. "Yeah, he got lucky this time around," says Garner. "I want a rematch!" Even the beautiful Trista got excited about the game: "The players look so amazing, I couldn't believe it wasn't real. I wish I could play those games!" Come on over to the **play** offices, Trista, we'll be happy to show you how to play.

And in typical Sony style, PlayStation and 989 Sports had an exclusive party at the W to celebrate the Game Before The Game, and of course there were plenty of top athletes and celebrities on hand (many of which whom left the Madden Bowl to attend). Of course, play was there rubbing elbows with the likes of Tara Reid, Deion Sanders, Marcus Allen, Michael Irvin, Dan Marino and Jason Taylor.

Trista "The Bachelorette" weighs in on the proceedings.

GAME
PlayStation.2

GAME
BEFORE THE
TEST

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

NINTENDO GAMECUBE

PlayStation.2

XBOX

GAME BOY ADVANCE

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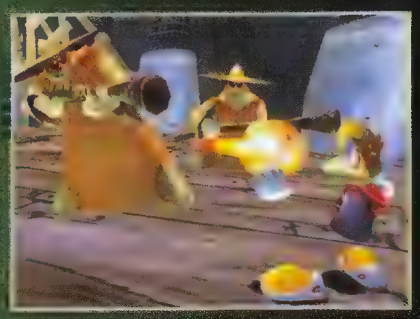
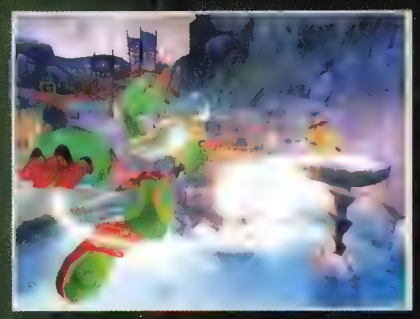
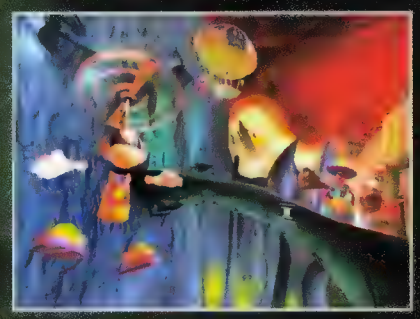






PLUNGE into 56 ENORMOUS levels and WHIP OUT all new powers & gear like the Heavy Metal Fist and LockJaw to battle the GARGANTUAN Hoodlum Army led by MASSIVE transforming bosses.

Official trailer featuring "Madder" by Groove Armada, courtesy of Jive Records.

EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Violence
Comic Mischief

Ubi Soft ENTERTAINMENT

Rayman 3
HOODLUM HAVOC

www.rayman3.com

kos-mos from namco's xenosaga

One of the greatest games ever made? We think so

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA
THE WIND WAKER

words michael hobbs

Searching for that perfect superlative is a favorite past time for many critical writers, as there are only so many words that can be used to describe how good something is. (You know you're in trouble when you've resorted to the word "staggering.") But I've gone through all of them in my head, and no single word is coming close to describing the experience contained within The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker. It's just as well. A game like this deserves more than a single-word description of its greatness. Here is a game that is so rich in its play, so inspired in its look, and so incredibly executed, that to try to encapsulate everything that's wonderful about it into one word, or even a thousand words, is to sleight it.

But I'll try, and I'll begin with the look of the game, which has obviously been the greatest talking point up until now. Put simply, the graphics here are nothing short of brilliant. There's a big difference between childish, which was most people's knee-jerk description of the game, and child-like, which is it what it actually is, with all the connotations of innocence and joyous abandon that phrase conjures up. This is the journey of a young boy, and it's as if the amazing world of the game is being seen through the eyes of a child. It's akin to what Steven Spielberg said of the magic of E.T.: "It's not a child's film, it's a film told from the point of view of a child."

The graphics represent a complete realization of a singular vision and are a masterpiece of execution. Let's examine the water for a glimpse at the brilliance. In a novel twist, the overworld in this game is the ocean, and you will spend a good deal of time early in the game sailing from destination to destination. In any other game, this would be represented almost metaphorically, with a simple 3D engine. But here, every cue is present to give you the impression that you really are sailing the open seas. In the deep

ocean, huge swells rise and fall in gentle arcs and your boat creaks as the wind buffets the translucent sail. Most amazing is that this astounding sensation of sailing is accomplished graphically by only a basic blue sea highlighted with the simplest white crests and sea foam. It's impressionistic, and it's a great indication of the level of artistry that Nintendo is still practicing. They are not interested in making a realistic ocean. They're interested in giving the player the impression of the ocean, which to me is an even more powerful form of expression because it's a flight of fancy. It transports you somewhere. The same thing happens when the sun sets or the weather changes. As rain beckons, the sky darkens, the sun disappears, and the air takes on that distinctive gray/green of an impending storm, creating the perfectly convincing illusion that rain is about to fall. You can almost literally smell the negatively charged air. Why? It's not because the clouds are made up of such and such number of polygons. It's because the artists have managed to fool me. These kinds of moments happen again and again in this game.

It's a wonderful thing to be fooled, isn't it? It's the reason that magicians have been popular since the beginning of recorded history. Humans like to have something put over on them. And not only is Zelda graphically pulling a rabbit out of its hat, it also represents a monumental achievement in game design. This is easily the most engaging and

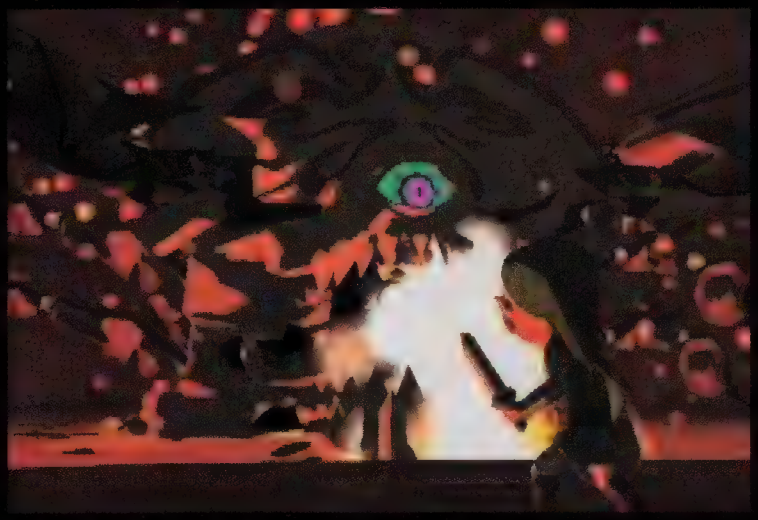
One of the great benefits of The Wind Waker's animated style is the amount of life given to Link. Look at his posture and the expression on his face as he approaches this lava flow bursting out from a cliff side. He isn't just an interactive character, an empty shell. He has real life

entertaining Zelda game I've ever played. There's a beautiful effortlessness to advancing in this game that belies the amount of skill, talent, and hard work that went into creating the experience. And I am not implying that the game is easy when I use the word effortless. Rather, I'm describing the sense of fun and discovery that just keeps you playing hour after hour without respite. Sometimes, large games like this contain a fair amount of tasks that begin to feel like chores, but this one just keeps giving and giving joy, never letting up on pleasing the eyes and fingers. Each delicious episode leads into the next, each minor adventure fleshing out the quest to save Link's sister in surprising and delightful ways.

But this is a classical Zelda game, and that means that the high points of this game are its dungeons, and they are every bit as clever and magnificent as you would expect. Challenges come in the form of delectably fun puzzles, which always make the best use of whatever item you've just found, whether it's the grappling hook, boomerang, or heavy shoes. It's always amazing to me just how good Nintendo is at creating this type of discovery-based gameplay. In this respect, there is simply no other developer on the planet that comes close. But we expect this level of design from Nintendo, and they would not be content with just giving us what we expect, so there are many surprises along the way.

One of the more stunning is the new kind of behavioral enemy A.I. that has been introduced here. When I first saw it, I literally gasped. As I was fighting these two guards, I knocked the weapon out

"The high points of this game are its dungeons, and they are every bit as clever and magnificent as you would expect."



"Mark my words: there will be no finer gaming experience this year."

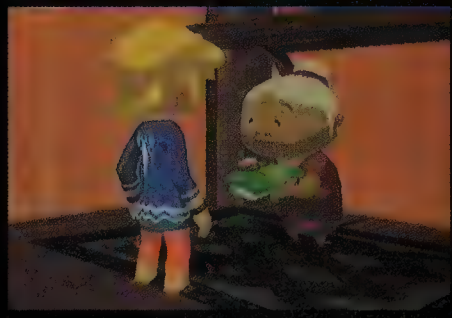
The expression of water in this game is one of the great impressionistic feats of modern game design. From just an animated blue field with some white highlights, Nintendo has created a completely convincing illusion of sailing the open seas

The first real boss in the game resides in a fire dungeon, and you will be amazed at not only how the boss looks, but how well it animates and how dramatic the encounter is

of one of their hands. This weapon-less guard ran over to his buddy and attacked him, taking his stick from him to come after me. I've never seen anything like this before, and it added such a sense of life to the enemies, as if they had thoughts of their own. Of course, some games probably have much more sophisticated A.I. routines so that enemies react in a deeply thoughtful way to your actions, but there was a visceral thrill in feeling the enemy's playful rage that was far more effective than some intelligent enemy dodging bullets. The combat is rife with other details that add life, excitement, and charm to them.

Nothing can prepare you for the greatness that is The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker. I only hope I've told you enough to make you rush out and buy it the instant it comes out. Mark my words: there will be no finer gaming experience this year.

The game makes great use of the GBA link. When attached, the GBA will display not only map data, but with a little help from Tingle, dispense valuable hints and even allow Link to uncover some hidden items



the legend of zelda: the wind waker

play rating ●●●●●

system: **gamecube** / developer: **nintendo** / publisher: **nintendo** / available: **now**

RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

THE TIDES OF WAR

OPERATION RESURRECTION

words brady fiechter

During Heinrich Himmler's younger, less ambitious years, he attempted to raise chickens and run a small farm, failing forcefully. Picking up and moving on, one day Himmler met Adolph Hitler, endearing himself to the world's human manifestation of pure evil to such a degree that he became the chief of the German Police. Wielding immense power through the many arms of the organization, even puppeteering the Gestapo, Himmler became such an important player in Hitler's reign that he was eventually given control of several concentration camps in the East. Hitler lovingly referred to Himmler as "der treue Heinrich"—the loyal Heinrich.

Before ingesting a cyanide pill to his death when standing in the interrogating face of British captors, Himmler had visions of delusional grandeur, dabbling in the occult and pseudoscience, believing he commanded the power to prompt scientists and researchers to create a super army.

All this is heavy, fascinating stuff, the disturbingly evocative underpinning to Return To Castle Wolfenstein. An eternal 11years ago, Wolfenstein 3D essentially pioneered the first-person shooter, dropping you into amusingly archaic maze of hallways adorned with images of Nazi Germany. In this intense sequel successfully transplanted from last year's PC original, the spirit of Wolfenstein 3D lives, yet so much has obviously changed. Beyond the expected leap in technical advancements, Return to Castle Wolfenstein is propelled by a detailed story that plays out around you, taking the game into far richer territory. Of course, the lacerating action of a traditional first-person shooter is priority number one, but outside the mechanics of the game, much research was spent looking into the diaries and literature of Himmler's exploits for inspiration to the game's story underpinnings. It is here where the game truly separates itself from the masses. Kevin Cloud, co-owner and artist of id software, which is executive producing the console versions of Wolfenstein, explains the nexus of Wolfenstein: "The cool thing for me was that when we were looking at the original Wolfenstein 3D, and bringing it up to this next stage of life, we were thinking, What if 'Stein is set in WWII Germany, but it's not really a WWII game, not a straight biography... It's not a sim, and we tried to take those concepts and decide how it would translate into a storyline that would be compelling for people who play today's games. What [original PC developer] Gray Matter was able to bring together I think makes a unique story for Wolfenstein. It's something you wont' find in any other game... The characters and events and things in the world are pulled from real life... they researched characters from Nazi Germany. It influenced the storyline all the way from the beginning to the very end. When you actually sit and play through the game, and see how it unwinds, you see some pretty amazing stuff. We're pretty proud of that."

The returning hero of the frightening times is steely army ranger B.J. Blaskowicz, an imprisoned member of the Office of Secret Actions who escapes his Nazi captors as the game opens and reports back to his commanders on the bizarre experiments he witnessed occurring inside the castle prison. "Your job is to infiltrate behind enemy lines into Nazi Germany, and your goal it to basically fight against the occult and genetic

"The developers could have very easily left restraint at the door, but the game finds a balance between a compelling reality and grim fantasy."

experiments," Cloud continues. "The theory for us was, in the the Wolfenstein universe, we take what was a lot of the philosophy and thinking of Himmler himself, and we thought, What could we do to make that come to life? What if all this—Himmler's interest in the occult, interest in genetic experiments—was actually realized in a real world? We took those events and placed them throughout the world, and that is what B.J. faces as he progresses through his battle with the Nazis."

"We knew we wanted it to be Nazi Germany, but not a war sim. In the original game, we would think of the Nazi war machine, and we would build this up into characters, into bosses and enemies we would fight. That concept, that fantasy flavor is what we wanted to bring over. At the beginning, we had a lot of discussions on how best to do that, and when we were doing more research into WWII, looking at how wild some of these beliefs were inside Nazi Germany, and how they made an incredible story. We wanted the game to have a strong action component. We didn't want to turn it into an adventure game.... Of course, with the weaponry and stuff like that, we were excited to see the more dark and fantasy approach on the consoles. But we definitely didn't want to make it a direct sequel..."

As your mission begins, the conflict resides with Nazi soldiers, who exhibit keen intelligence and cool death animations. They work in teams, react to noise and the fellow wounded, kick back grenades and smother them, interact with objects for cover. Moving through city streets, castle keeps and dungeon spaces, the game eventually explores the more fictional, supernatural elements of the story, showing great variety as settings such as labs and factories come in to play. In the X-labs, the results of Himmler's horrors are fully unleashed, where biomechanical creations roam the halls. The game is big on scripted events; it's a blast watching the creations getting out of control and breaking free from their cages, finding no discrimination on who to kill. "These lopers are one of the first experiments where they try to create the super fighting soldier," says Cloud. "He's pretty vicious but not easy to control, so they relegate him to the test range..."

"He has no legs," adds Brandon James, president of Nerve Software, which is working on the Xbox version. "There's like a generator at the bottom of his torso, and he crawls around on both arms. It's disfigured and ugly and menacing. He'll shock you, flip around to come at you. Some of the cooler stuff is how these characters evolved for the console... And speaking of the X-labs, there's a genetically mutated German Shepherd [that's new to console.] They're X-Shepherds, half machine, half dog, with glowing eyes, and they will come up and bite and claw. And these creatures also have a chain gun, mounted on their back. He arches up, grabbing the ground, and starts rittling you with fire. There's also another new character in the cryptic church level. This cult priest still [freaks out] one of the guys in the office, after we added him into this one area, he was petrified... You know, they move very slowly. It's like when you watch a horror movie, the person running around is going really fast, and the bad guy just stalks slowly. That's what this guy does. He moves very slowly, wears a dark robe and a death mask. And he shoots at you with his hand, this electrical energy, much like the Emperor in Star Wars."

Give us more. "Well, there are some very creepy areas you will find down in the criptish type levels, and it still scares me [laughs]. Seeing, like, one of these these war zombies— they're undead, and they have these shields and swords, and there's this way they're sort of hunched over, creeping around this area—it just gives me chills," says James.

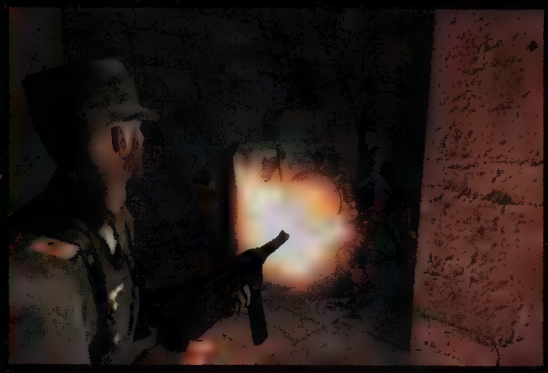
"And the way the bullets ricochet off their shields!" exclaims Cloud. "Also in these areas, you see flame-spitting zombies. You see this zombie rise out of ashes, and you get locked into a room, and this guy comes out of this pit and starts shooting fire all around."

There are times when Wolfenstein rewards your trigger-happy fingers with loads of enemies pouring from all corners, but breaking down the door with chain gun held to overload is not always smart. "You can definitely play the game stealthily," says James. "I myself am not very good at stealth [laughs]... In some of these environments—and here's another part where story elements where hints come in— you can pick up on some dialogue between Nazi soldiers that are deeper within the level. And if you can approach those types of situations without making any sound, moving very slowly, you can lean around corners, and You'll see these characters having conversations, and you can listen in; you can sneak up on them and jack them in the back with a knife if you so choose. In some instances, playing stealthily will give you some rewards. They'll spit out different items, like if you hit them in the back. There's also other areas of maps that will be locked or unlocked, depending on how you move through the map. If you're setting off alarms the map will change. There are some environments where you don't want alarms to set up, and you really, really have to play stealthily to get through."

Of all the weapons in the game—from the devastating smothering of the flame thrower to the satisfying force of the silenced Stin—the sniper rifle requires the most satisfying calculation and tends to deliver some of the better stealthy moments in the game. Its use also demonstrates the crafty AI. "Almost every time I've got a sniper I want to use it!" says Cloud. "There are some great moments, like this one level where you actually come out onto an air base and, up in the control tower, when you survey the land, you'll notice a series of guards starting to move. You'll have an officer at the top of the control tower, he'll have a set of binoculars, and he's looking, panning left and right as he's scouting. You have another set of guards down below who are actually on patrol and moving. Now, the key to enter in to that level the cleanest way is to make sure you take out these guards so they can't sound an alarm. The guards have to go and physically

Two Versions

Return to Castle Wolfenstein has actually received separate focus for both the PS2 and Xbox. On Xbox, the game is entitled Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War, and has received special attention for the Xbox Live online play, with a few added maps thrown in. The developer, Nerve Software, actually crafted the PC multiplayer aspect of Wolfenstein. As for the PS2 version, it is called Operation Resurrection, and to make up for the lack of online play, has received extra levels as a prologue. Raster Productions' rich history goes all the way back to Doom on PSone, with recent credits for Quake III arena on Dreamcast. Both games have subtle differences, of course, but for the most part are lifted right out of the PC Wolfenstein, with a few added enemies and weapons, like the shotgun.



Wolfenstein mixes action with cinematics

hit the alarm or make enough noise so that someone near can hit it. So if you take them out before they make noise or see each other fall, then that's the key. While the other guards are on patrols and they reverse themselves and start moving away from the officers, you take the officer out first. But you have to make sure the two guards down below will actually pass each other, and if they turn and faced each other, it's a bad time to take them out, because if they see the other get killed, they'll try to shout for an alarm. So when they're in position going the opposite way, you take them out, which allows you to sneak to the tower and drop down through a grate that brings you down inside the actual control tower base. If you don't do that, you have a heck of a lot of gunfire and calls for support—guys pouring out of trucks. You have to now fight your way down the hill... It really is important to survey the events in the level the best you can. Brandon talked about being able to lean around corners and things like that. But you have to take out the guards in the appropriate order and use the appropriate weapon."

Bottom line: there is a beastly heart beating inside this FPS, and there are more than enough moments when an all-out firestorm rocks the screen. But the game does not go overboard with the gore, does not take itself to shocking extremes. The developers could have very easily left restraint at the door when crafting Return to Castle Wolfenstein, and the game finds a balance between a compelling reality and grim fantasy. Not that they weren't tempted to go for broke "Well, I was going to say that we are always being held back [laughs]. When you think about it being dark, it's dark, but it's in the context of like an Indiana Jones or an X-Files, where there are dark elements but the story is so fantastic that it takes on a sort of adventure flair that goes beyond, I guess you could say, completely sitting in the dark," says James.

Religious imagery and authentic paintings and drawings from the period give everything a more engaging, unsettling tone. Careful research into the distinct European landscape lent much to the visual strength. "... The team went to Europe and spent a lot of time taking photographs and videos," explains Cloud. "At Gray Matter, that's how they set up their games. They do a ton of research. A lot of the environments—actually, I'd say the majority of the environments are from images they pulled from these trips. There's ton of data from that research. It's definitely one of the better looking games I've seen. Just fantastic looking environments."

This attention to the real-world details and blending of what is recognizable and what is dreamed up is always key. "Yeah, it's cool to hear you say that," agrees Cloud. "Absolutely: and Drew, if he were here, would be smiling to hear that. And that's really a specialty, and it's great for a game like Wolfenstein—and I kind of compare it to Jones—where you've got a realistic setting with a fantastic story. And it was all really pulled off well. Like I said before, a lot of weapons and ideas from the storyline came through research and what was really going on at the time."

Unfortunately, I had little time to spend in the Xbox Live arena of Wolfenstein, but there's absolutely no doubt that the network play is an invaluable addition to the experience. "We tailored the game to the console environment [while retaining] game modes that were present on the PC," says James. "You have the objective mode, which is: one team is defense, one is offense, and you have a number of objectives you must clear before the match is up. You have a check point, where both teams are vying to pull the flag and control the areas. You also have stop watch, where one team gets a chance to be on offense and carry the objective, which resets the clock, and then the team's split: the team that was on defense is now on offense and must beat that clock. Also elimination, which is new to console—almost team death match, last-man standing... All the objectives are turned off, and it's purely Ally versus Axis. Each character gets one life, which really brings out the need for medics and lieutenants. And when you only have one life, you really have to make it last. There are some new maps too for Live. There's 16 maps total. And, oh! Of course there's the voice communicator for Xbox Live. So when you're on a team, you can talk to your teammates. Some of the voice commands are being used on the d-pad—like medic, if you need ammo. The shotgun is in as well. Engineers can select the shotgun, so if they're hunched over dynamite, and someone sneaks up, you can blast them with the shotgun. Multiplayer's been a blast with Xbox Live."

"One other thing to touch on," adds Cloud. "We're doing two-player co-op, split-screen co-op through the single-player game [on Xbox]. It actually plays out very well. I've played a lot of Wolfenstein, and playing co-op for the first time, it was almost like brand new... There are really a lot of different things that pull people in. Fundamentally, the game has great passion. There are so many levels, so much gameplay where you're really drawn into the experience of just the combat."

return to castle wolfenstein: the tides of war / operation resurrection

system: **xbox, playstaion 2 /** developer: **nerve software, raster productions /** publisher: **activision /** available: **summer**

A fix-all sequel to an already great game

zone of the enders: the second runner

words michael hobbs

I was a huge fan of the original Zone of the Enders, even as I had a lot of problems with it. On the one hand, here was one of the most beautifully executed 3D action/fighting/shooting engines ever devised, and half the time you were shooting these ridiculous little targets that you couldn't even lock onto. Here was one of the most ambitious meldings of story and gameplay yet attempted for an action game, and it's starring a kid I could really care less about. Here was one of the great achievements in art direction, and there were only a handful of levels. And yet, I loved the game, for its highs were very high.

The sequel looks to address all of these issues (I guess I wasn't the only one complaining), and the end result could be one of the most amazing action games this year. Given but a brief demo to play, I've already been introduced to not only a wealth of new gameplay features, but a vast shift in graphical style that is both hugely successful and appropriate for the theme of creating an interactive anime.

In terms of gameplay, there are now many different sub-weapons at your disposal, along with a much more robust throwing mechanic, allowing you to grab and twirl enemies around, releasing them to cause major damage. And in general, there's just a lot more action per minute in this game. It has a relentless pace and it plays like a dream. But it's in the way Zone of the Enders 2 looks that really earns it fresh praise. Like Zelda, this game has a completely unique visual style, somewhere between CG and anime that is startling to watch in real time. Smoke clouds billow, lasers pierce, and through the thick fog of action, you get glimpses of the coolest mech poses ever committed to the screen.

In every way, this is probably the game that everyone hoped the first one would be.

"In every way, this is probably the game that everyone hoped the first one would be."

zone of the enders: the second runner

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **kcej** / publisher: **konami** / available: **march**

Konami's classic series takes a new direction

castlevania: aria of sorrow

words tom ham

Being huge fans of the Castlevania series, we here at **play** have no choice but to grin from ear to ear when we hear that another game is in the works for this famed franchise. At an exclusive press event earlier this year, Konami invited Castlevania producer Koji Igarashi to present his latest masterpiece, Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow, for a select group of media. One of the lucky ones, we were there and got to check out the game as well as chat with this brilliant game producer.

Slated for a May 2003 release, Aria of Sorrow is the third Castlevania game for the Game Boy Advance. Not only does it introduce a new character, the game takes place in the future, a first for the series. "The reason why we set the game in the future was because normally it is very hard to picture it," explains Igarashi, "and personally speaking, I was originally picturing the future element as a comedy part to the story. For example, having a cyber or computerized Dracula from the future would be interesting enough to make a Castlevania GAIDEN or a side story. Anyway, I wanted to put an end to the Castlevania history in 1999. I decided to restructure a new Castlevania world, starting from that point. Yet in the beginning, we had already made up our mind that we would not make a futuristic Castle or story simply because the story is set in 2035. Since the beginning of the game takes place inside Dracula's Castle from 1999 (which is trapped inside the Solar Eclipse), we were never confused or faced any troubles in developing Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow."

The hero in Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow is Soma Cruz. The game begins with Soma and his friend Mina, traveling to Transylvania to witness the first solar eclipse of the 21st century. Unbeknownst to them, Dracula's castle was banished into a solar eclipse in 1999. While Soma and Mina were watching the solar eclipse, it transports them to the mysterious castle where they have to battle wave after wave of evil minions in order to escape. "We knew from the beginning that Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow would be released soon after our previously produced Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance," continues Igarashi, "so we wanted to do something different and new. In addition, we were planning to adapt the overall system from Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance, so we felt the necessity of presenting a brand new game to not disappoint the fans. To achieve our goal with taking Castlevania in a different direction, we wanted to introduce Soma Cruz as a new character. Although he's the brand new character, it does not mean that we can no longer retain the original Castlevania atmosphere

and experience. If you play the game, I'm sure you'll understand what I mean and I'm very confident and happy to inform you that it still is an authentic Castlevania game." Amen to that.

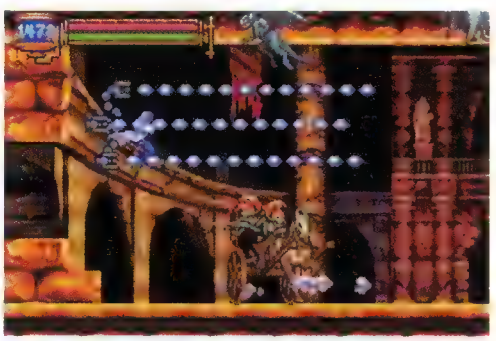
If you're thinking, "What about the Belmont Clan?" don't worry, we were wondering the same thing. "Just because we made Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow take place in a different setting with different characters, it does not mean that the famed Belmont family was wiped out from history," says Igarashi. "There are plans to present some episodes of the Belmont family. Remember the time when Alucard from Castlevania: Symphony of the Night...when he was the main character of the game? If you remember, the Belmont family did not perish. So you can rest assured knowing that they will return someday!"

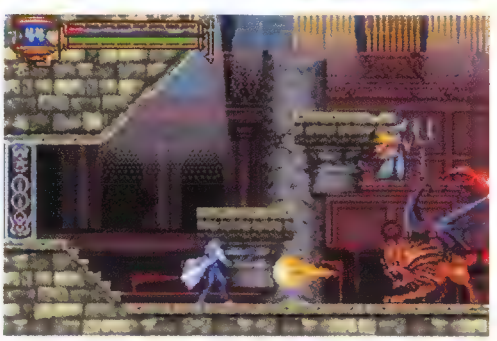
Of course the new storyline and characters impressed us, but what really blew us away was how distinctly different the level design and gameplay was compared to previous games. For example, the whip that we've all become familiar with is gone. Now before you start whining about it, read on. Soma will still have a wide assortment of weapons in the game, but what's cool about Aria of Sorrow is that he can actually gains abilities as he progresses through the game by absorbing souls: There are literally hundreds of different kinds of souls that Soma can use and what's really wicked is that each soul has its own distinct quality. Some may be good for attacks while others are strictly for defense. "As many fans noticed in Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow also lets the player use tons of different weapons – making the gameplay very fun, varied and with lots of depth," explains Igarashi. "With this game, the player has a wide variety of weapons to choose from, but they also have the tactical soul system, where the player can attack/defend using the souls of the monsters. Both weapons and souls have their pros/cons, so the player will establish their own attack style and combination. In earlier Castlevania games, the player was only given a whip and subweapon, so the game style was really a game of skill (i.e. your whip and subweapon are used in the right place with the right timing). In Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow, however, we wanted to deliver a Castlevania: Symphony of the Night experience where the player could customize the attacks and think more on their toes as to what would work best at any given moment. Additionally, the options that the player has in Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow are even wider in range compared to Castlevania: Symphony of the Night. My personal recommendation and my favorite souls to use are the Guardian Type!"

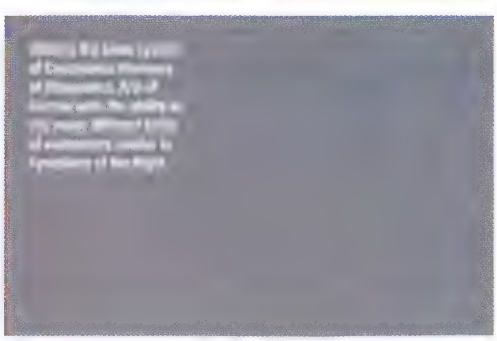
Igarashi also points out that there will be different types of souls in the game as well. "We have three main types of soul to equip and then a special fourth set, Bullet Souls. Just like the subweapon system in the past, these soul powers are used by pressing Control Pad Up + B Button. The soul will consume MP every time you use it— for example, throwing spears or bones. Guardian Souls: These souls enable you to transform into something or summon familiars to help you during your adventure. Holding down the R Button will initiate the soul power. While you are holding the button down, MP will consume according to how long you use the power. Enchanted Souls: These souls give the player powers and affects the player as soon as the soul is equipped. For example, the ability to walk above/below water. Something that is effective just by equipping. As I mentioned, there is a special fourth type of abilities that are just like relics from Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance. Ability Souls: These souls give the player special powers and is effective as soon as you get it. For example, the ability to double-jump. Oh yeah, don't forget that you can link up two GBAs and trade souls with your friends. With over 100+ souls to discover and acquire, using your friends is a great way to experiment with different soul types."

Although we were only shown a limited number of levels and gameplay elements, we couldn't help but be thoroughly impressed with Aria of Sorrow. The game's visuals still have the same high quality we have all come to expect and the special moves are just awesome to look at. "This game is the best Castlevania game among all of the previous games in the series" closes Igarashi. "We're very proud to announce that every element of the game is made to the highest standard of quality and the game itself is superb. Everything is made to perfection and I'm sure all of you will love it. We believe that there really haven't been any other games quite like Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow. It's just a great game. We are extremely confident about presenting this game to any gamer. Everything in the game is what we're proud of and we're very happy about the end result." We can't wait.

"What really blew us away was how distinctly different the level design and gameplay was compared to previous games."

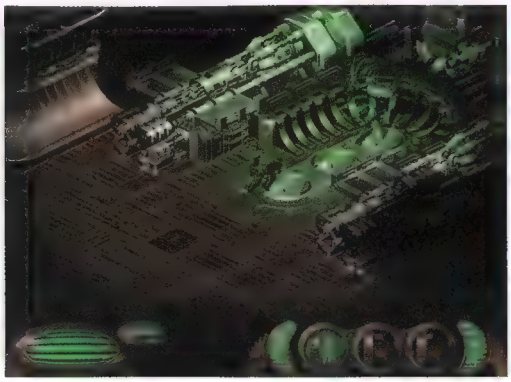






castlevania: aria of sorrow

system: **game boy advance** / developer: **konami** / publisher: **konami** / available: **may**



Harbinger

system: **pc**
developer: **silverback**
publisher: **dreamcatcher**
available: **feb 25**

Where lesser ships have fallen, Harbinger stands—a monument to her master's destructive appetites... Think Diablo II with a deep back story and character-specific quests...exactly. We're excited for a PC game, which doesn't happen often. Harbinger is set to take action/role-playing the way of the Meat Puppet...we hope. We'll review it in April.

XGRA

SX Superstar

system: **playstation 2/xbox/gamecube**
developer: **climax london**
publisher: **acclaim entertainment**
available: **april 2003**

A cool twist on the MX genre: in Acclaim's SX Superstar, you evolve your rider from a lowly scrub to filthy-rich pro, provided you win. Better bikes, houses, babes — the works — as you vie for air in the world's first motocross RPG. Goodbye McGrath, hello Climax!

Hunter: The Reckoning - Wayward and Redeemer

State of Emergency

system: **xbox**
developer: **vis**
publisher: **rockstar**
available: **march 2003**

Get this! Not only does SoE now run at a buttery 60 fps, but it's been tweaked to the nth... with new missions, [illegible] 4 versions of multiplayer — including a two-player split screen that'll have you booting Pepsi machines out of your road (you'll understand that one — and you can [illegible]

Midnight Club II

system: **playstation 2**
developer: **rockstar**
publisher: **rockstar**
available: **march 2003**

Imagine everything you could possibly want in a MC sequel and you probably won't even come close to the depth of MC II. When we say this game has it all, we...are dirty liars. It doesn't have a Vice City tie-in. It does kick ass though.

Fear Effect 3

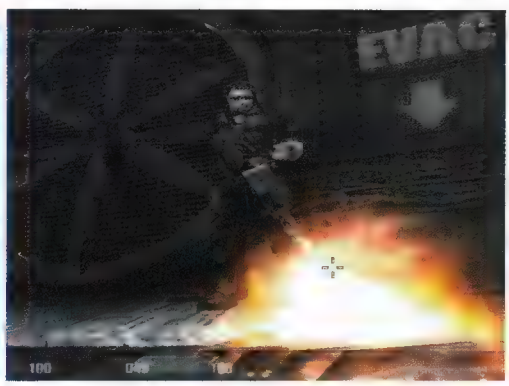
[illegible]

[illegible]

Blowout

system: **gamecube**
developer: **kaos kontrol**
publisher: **majesco**
available: **sept**

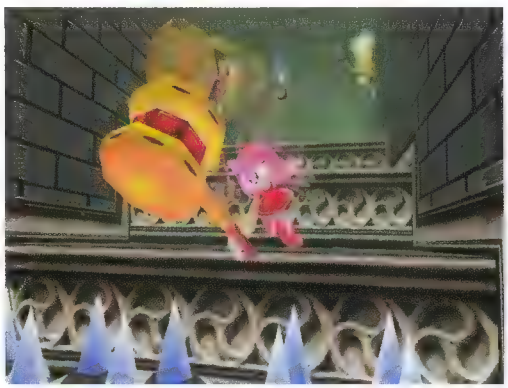
With character designs from renowned Japanese artist Yasushi Nirasawa — the prolific and innovative creature designer helping usher in a new wave of Japanese manga — Majesco seems to have yet another hit on its hands. Yasushi also did the creature designs for *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*. Said to play like a 2D Contra in 3D...imagine the possibilities.

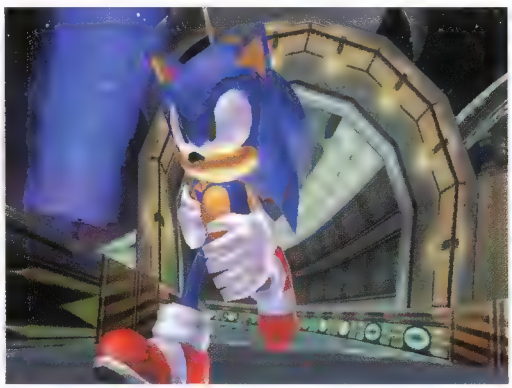


Auto Modellista

system: **playstation 2**
developer: **capcom**
publisher: **capcom**
available: **march**

We're sad to hear that Auto Modellista, a nearly complete version of Auto Modellista, missing just online play and some of Motoaz elements, did not make it in time for the first. The game's breathtaking blend of speed and clever use of cel-shading makes Auto Modellista a real stand out. Easy car upgrading and customization also make for a fantastic, arcade-like racing experience.

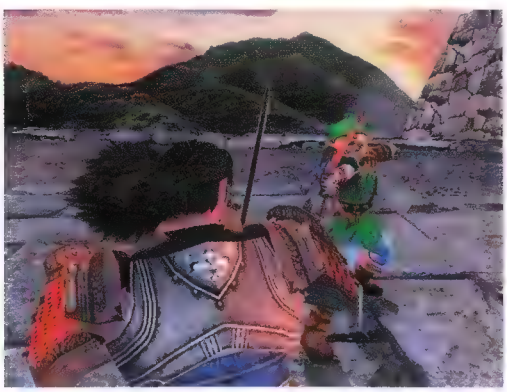




Sonic Adventure DX

~~system: gamecube~~
~~developer: sonic team~~
~~publisher: sega~~
~~available: march~~

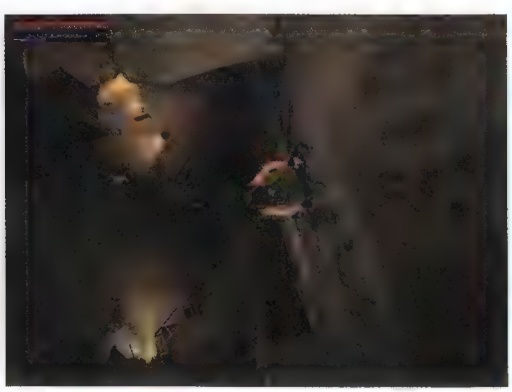
The Dreamcast original is being ported to GameCube—definitely some good news since it's a better game all around than SA2, and it [illegible] GameCube pad. Also, there are [illegible] the Dreamcast version, so it looks like it's going to be a very solid port. Sonic fans will love it.



Soul Calibur II

~~system: playstation 2, xbox, gamecube~~
~~developer: namco~~
~~publisher: namco~~
~~available: march~~

So this is what they've been working on. The sequel to stunning Soul Calibur has finally broken cover, revealing some revamped stylish combos, CapcomSoft weapons and have a playable Link. Xbox get Ivy and Voldo, and the PS2 boasts Heihachi from Tekken.



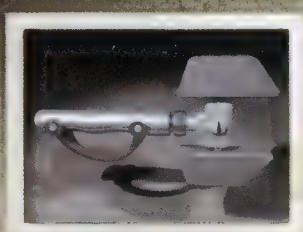
Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness

~~system: playstation 2~~
~~developer: core~~
~~publisher: eidos~~
~~available: april~~

As Tomb Raider's [illegible] returns [illegible] series [illegible] to original roots. We're not sure [illegible] only 4, [illegible] sure is [illegible] we're [illegible] to [illegible] Can't wait to see [illegible]

LIVE IN YOUR WORLD
PLAY IN OURS™

HELI-PACK
THAT LITTLE ROBOT IS FINALLY GOOD FOR SOMETHING.



WRENCH
WHAT DO YOU WANT? IT'S A FRIGGIN' WRENCH.

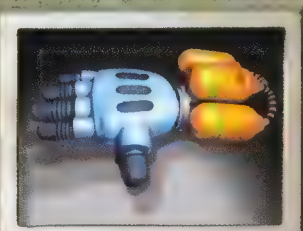
BOMB GLOVE
FINALLY, GLOVES THAT FIT NICE AND TELL SMALL.

GRINDBOOTS
MORE LONGER RAILS THAN YOU'VE EVER SEEN ABOUT WHERE.

SWINGSHOT
REMEMBER THE SWINGS AT THE COUNTY FAIR? QUADRUPLE THAT.

MAGNEBOOTS
WALK UP WALLS, WALK DOWN WALLS, WHATEVER MAKES YOU HAPPY.

GLOVE OF DOOM
IT'S JUST LIKE THE OLD EGG TOSS, ONLY THESE EGGS HATCH AND KILL.

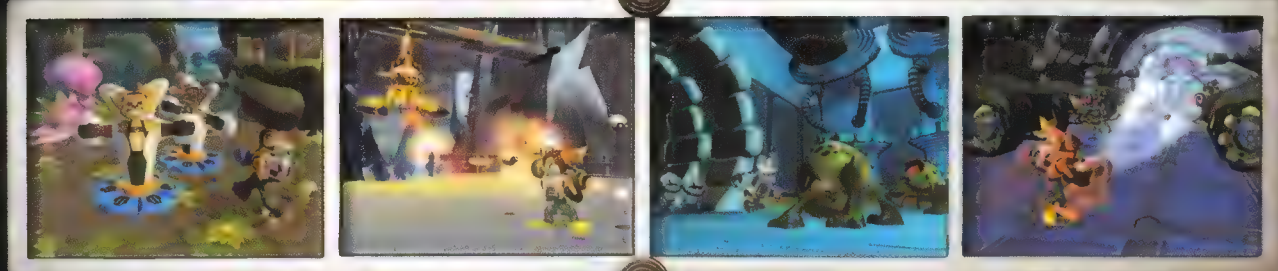


DECOY GLOVE
WILL THE REAL RATCHET PLEASE STEP FORWARD?

ONE DAY YOU WILL LOOK BACK AT ALL THE DESTRUCTION YOU CAUSED AND SMILE

RIP THE GALAXY A NEW ONE.
YOU DECIDE HOW.

Ratchet & Clank



PlayStation 2

INSOMNIAC GAMES

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TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Mild Violence

Capcom's dark angel returns

devil may cry 2

words dave halverson

Throughout the relatively short history of video games, Capcom has dominated the action category by producing consistently better gameplay and building it around some of the most enduring characters in all of gaming, from Sir Arthur, Strider and Mega Man to Dante, Jill Valentine and Maximo. Seldom does Capcom release a game that isn't bred for long-term growth. Besides Bionic Commando (Strider is underutilized as well), most of their mainstream launches have blossomed into titles that spawn fan sites and make their producers into the video-game equivalent of celebrity. Even more so than Maximo—a brilliant character sculpted by one of Japan's most revered game artists, Susumu Matsushita —Devil May Cry is the epitome of a superlative franchise. Dante's demon-slaying ways and supernatural guise give him everlasting life as a character, and the aura of the game, like Resident Evil, begs to be brought to the silver screen.

Beyond the gorgeous visuals, cinematography, and death-metal marionettes of the first game, DMC2's producer, Tsuyoshi Tanaka, has infused this sequel with so much gothic undulation that it melts into every fiber of your being as you soak in each ill-omened backdrop, carried on a soundtrack that draws you deeper and deeper into its grip the further you delve. Devil May Cry introduced us to the most striking male lead since Alucard and gave him an array of moves so wicked and otherworldly—with demon form, limitless juggles, and lightning quick jumps and dashes—they seem almost impossible to best, but Tanaka has. The new Dante's inner demon has come bubbling to the surface —his movement now so gratuitous you almost feel guilty playing him—and the game's heroine, Lucia, a scrumptious balance of cunning beauty, athleticism and sexuality, is the female we've been wanting since Konami scrapped Castlevania for the Dreamcast. Together they make Devil May Cry 2 one of the best action games ever devised, and seal its fate as Capcom's greatest franchise since Resident Evil; the use of cinematography and cinematic cameras again taken to new heights.

The differences between the game's two incarnations run fairly deep as sequels go. Devil May Cry 2 doesn't feel nearly as scripted as the original and is opened up considerably—the expansive, exquisite backgrounds bring with them more freedom and exploration. The structure remains the same, for the most part, although the new system runs a bit deeper in terms of evolving the characters and their abilities. Amulet stones and environment-specific weapons like underwater bows (yes, more underwater!) add considerably to the play mechanics

You were expecting Trish? I know we were. Lucia however, presents a much more compelling backstory. Trish is in here though... beat Lucia's game on hard to own her

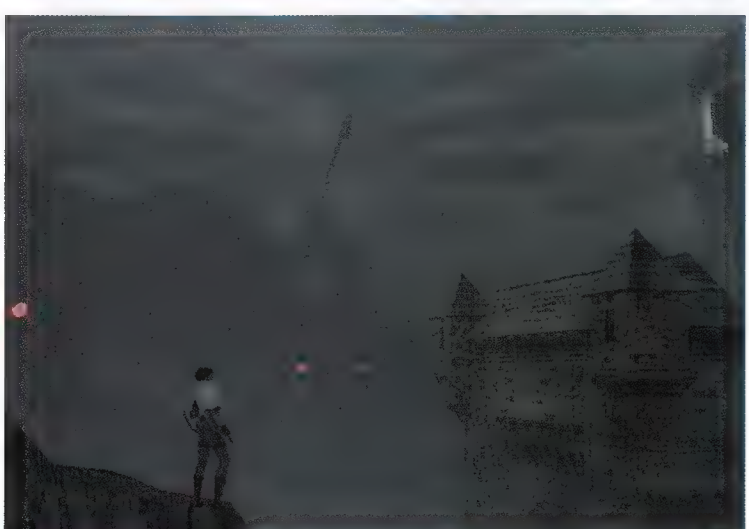
and new items such as bombs and assorted blades give you more to think about, strategizing the best means to dispose of the more varied enemies.

My affinity for female characters drew me instantly to Lucia, whose array of moves transforms the controller into puppet strings, with variations on kicks, dagger and throwing knife attacks, and aerial acrobatics hardwired into every possible facet of the control; and Dante is as bad-ass as ever, his longsword and revolver as satisfying to control. Both characters took the green pill as well, possessing wall-running skills that add further dimension to their nimbleness.

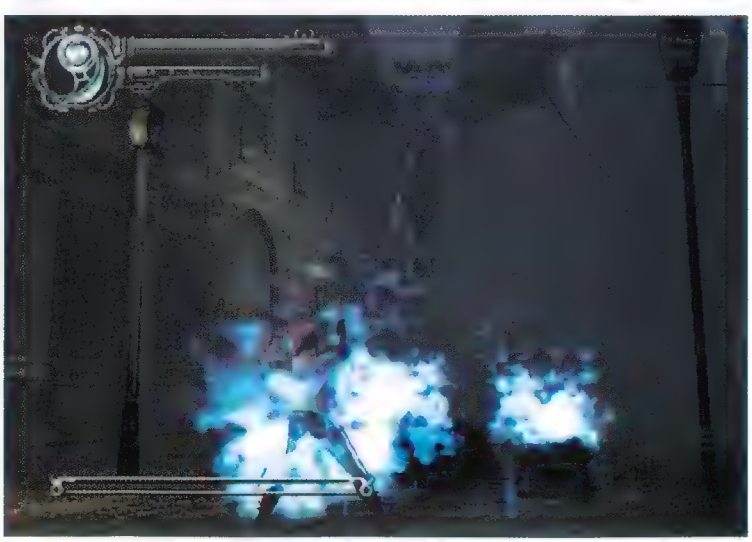
The disparity in their quests, combined with the game's built-in replayability, give DMC2 a measure of depth seldom seen in an action title. Lucia's tale alone, a cruel sonnet of self-realization wrapped in a story steeped in religious overtones, is reason enough to buy the game. Another thing Capcom never fails to deliver are bosses, and these ones—big, nasty and as old-school as 3D can be—carry on that tradition.

There will be those who complain of DMC2's cinematic camera, opting for a game devoid of cinematography to make up for their lack of coordination, but readers of this magazine need not hesitate for any reason: this is a sequel you simply cannot be without.

"Lucia's tale alone, a cruel sonnet of self realization wrapped in a story steeped in religious overtones, is reason enough to buy the game."



Moments like this helped cement Devil May Cry into the gothic epic is has become



devil may cry 2

play rating ●●●●●

system: **playstaion 2** / developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom** / available: **now**

Skies' Achillies heel–slow loading battles–has been mended.

One thing that the GameCube sorely needs, RPGs, it is about to receive, beginning with one of the best in recent years, Sega's Skies of Arcadia, now dubbed Legends. Semi-fresh from its stint on the oft-missed and forever-beloved Sega Dreamcast, Skies arrives on the Cube all gussied up with a new layer of polish, faster battles (the original's single biggest flaw), new side quests, and added depth to a cast which deserves much ado on their way to becoming a Sega RPG brand akin to what Phantasy Star is, and Sword of Vermillion should have been.

I like Skies' weapon upgrade system—using precious Moonstones to upgrade four colored elements, tuning each for different areas of the game—but I still wish the characters moved better in battle, less wooden and more like Grandia Extreme's. I'm still finding it hard to stomach stacks of similar battles that break the flow, too (the old RPG credo has definitely worn thin with me), but that stigma is stayed somewhat by deviating from the walk-fight doctrine with strategic ship-to-ship (say that real fast a bunch of times) air battles and other play mechanics woven into the plot; another area where this game truly sparkles. The mark of any truly legendary RPG lies in its characters and story, and in both of these areas Skies' shines as brightly as its most blue-blue skies.

Skies' visuals are slightly behind the times, but I wouldn't call it an ugly duckling. On the contrary, its character designs are full of expression, but it does employ slightly dated technology where the models and environments are concerned. Just as Dragon Quest VII is and always will be on the PlayStation, Skies' graphics are so polished for what they are, any technological residue quickly fades away, replaced by an instant affinity for Vyse and Fina as they rise up against the powerful Valuan army. If you're still into riding the traditional RPG train: all aboard!

"Skies' graphics are so polished for what they are, any technological residue quickly fades away, replaced by an instant affinity for Vyse and Fina"

skies of arcadia legends

play rating ●●●●●

system: **gamecube** / developer: **overworks** / publisher: **sega** / available: **now**

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MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore

Violence

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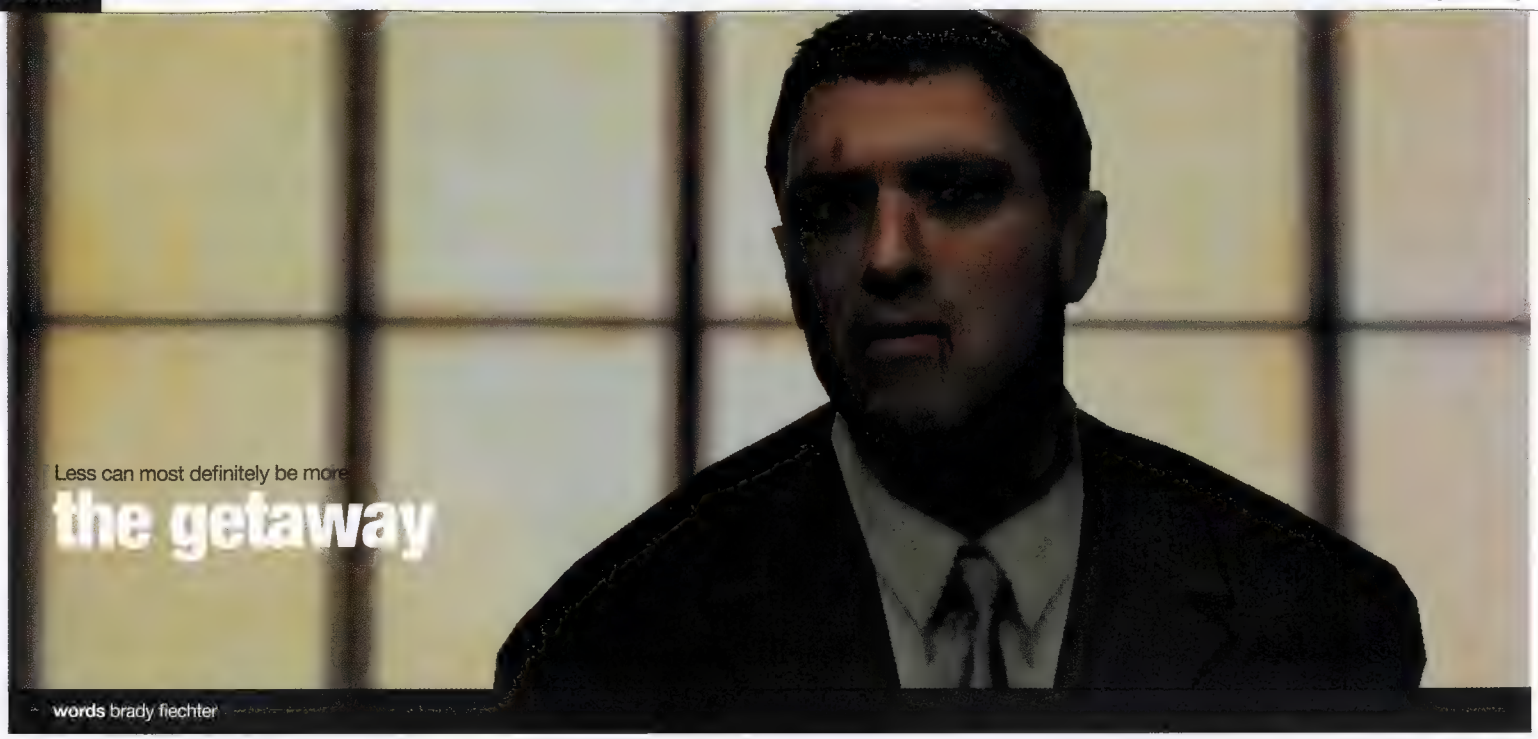

Less can most definitely be more

the getaway

words brady fiechter

The admirably ambitious and strenuously misguided The Getaway opens strong, with reformed high-class criminal Mark Hammond grasping the limp body of his dying wife, who disturbingly pleads for him to rescue their kidnapped son as the assailants, cursing and spitting with impenetrable British accents, zip away with child in tow. The chase is on, a high-energy twist through the authentically rendered city streets of an amazingly convincing modern-day London. Hapless pedestrians and unsuspecting traffic left smashed in the wake of Hammond's frantic driving, the chase ends in a wherehouse, where mob boss perpetrator and incessant cigar smoker Charlie Jolson orders the crap beat out of Hammond while demanding that he spearhead a crime spree across the city.

So off we go to leave a trail of death, jacking a huge array of real cars, demolishing drug bars, precipitating gang wars, destroying a police station, all in the name of "save the boy!" The Getaway wants to tell a story as much as provide an intense gameplay experience, advancing the limp, porous plot with several ponderous cut scenes that are finely acted and smartly framed yet too visually crude within the attempted realism to sustain their initial impact. The story never builds and arrives at nothing, leaving the weak child-in-peril setup to crumble even farther without the support of snappy, colorful dialogue. Inhabitants of the game's bustling world love obscenities, and after dropping "fuck" for the hundredth time, mental shutdown begins to commence.

There are moments in The Getaway that do provide a jolt of energy—the driving scenes are handled extremely well, and the action is skillfully staged—but even then the clumsy controls and skitzo character movement disarm the fun. The game revels in its shock value, disregarding the importance of restraint in a real-world setting: anyone can be used as a human shield, left for dead with a point-blank shot to the head or snap of the neck; the enemy comes too fast and too hard and in far too many numbers to be remotely believable within the constraints of the storytelling, leaving a perfunctory wake where apprehension and tension could have been everything; events carry little plausibility and strain to link the gameplay elements. In a game that is billed as a "true filmic crossover," neither the story nor the play provide any pull, and their inability to work in tandem reveals the cracks even deeper.

For all its missteps, The Getaway is not a complete failure; some of you will be more receptive to its successes and quicker to disregard its nagging flaws. But I found the game cold and off putting, straining to be something much more than the ultimate sum of its clunky parts.

"The Getaway wants to tell a story as much as provide an intense gameplay experience."

Just say no to drugs, but yes to that bad-ass white IS300.

the getaway

play rating

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **team soho** / publisher: **sony** / available: **now**

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Even without Rayman creator Michel Ancel on board, the magic continues

rayman 3: hoodlum havoc

words dave halverson

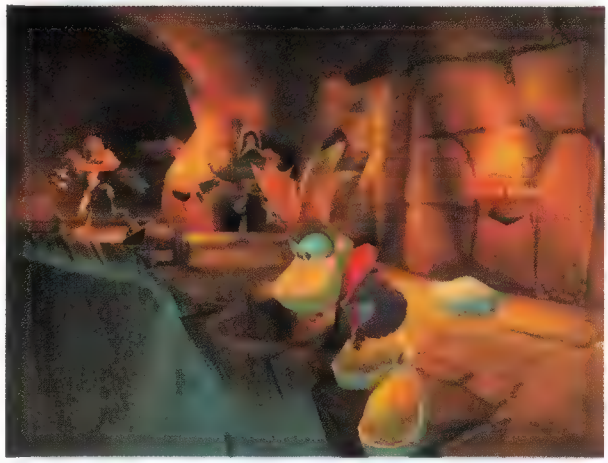
Whether you've been playing games for ten years or ten minutes, I can't stress enough how important it is that you play this game. Mario Sunshine let you down? Blinx wasn't all you'd hoped for? Well, if Rayman 3 doesn't kindle, or rekindle your love for platformers, nothing will. This world that somehow makes the subtle sublime transcends the laws of game creation to the point that it almost defies description.

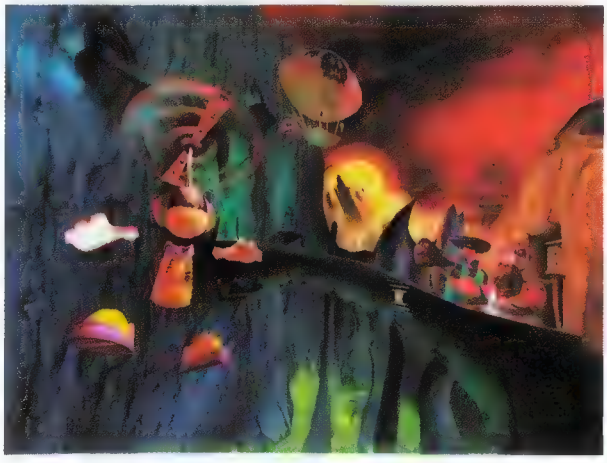
First, take everything you know about Rayman and cast it aside. Sure, this is still the peculiar, pensive little creature with no limbs and a heart of gold, but he's infused with so many new dimensions he rarely comes off as being the same at all. Somehow, sans series architect Michael Ancel, who's off working on his latest masterpiece, this new team has improved on everything we loved about this amazing series and at the same time made it completely fresh; it's the ultimate sequel.

A rogue Lum has united an army of Dark Lums, and by attacking wooly creatures in a whirling frenzy, began spinning themselves into Hoodlums: Hoodblasters, Hoodbooms, and Hoodoos.

"First, take everything you know about Rayman and cast it aside."

Classic Rayman action is mixed with a wealth of new play mechanics and abilities





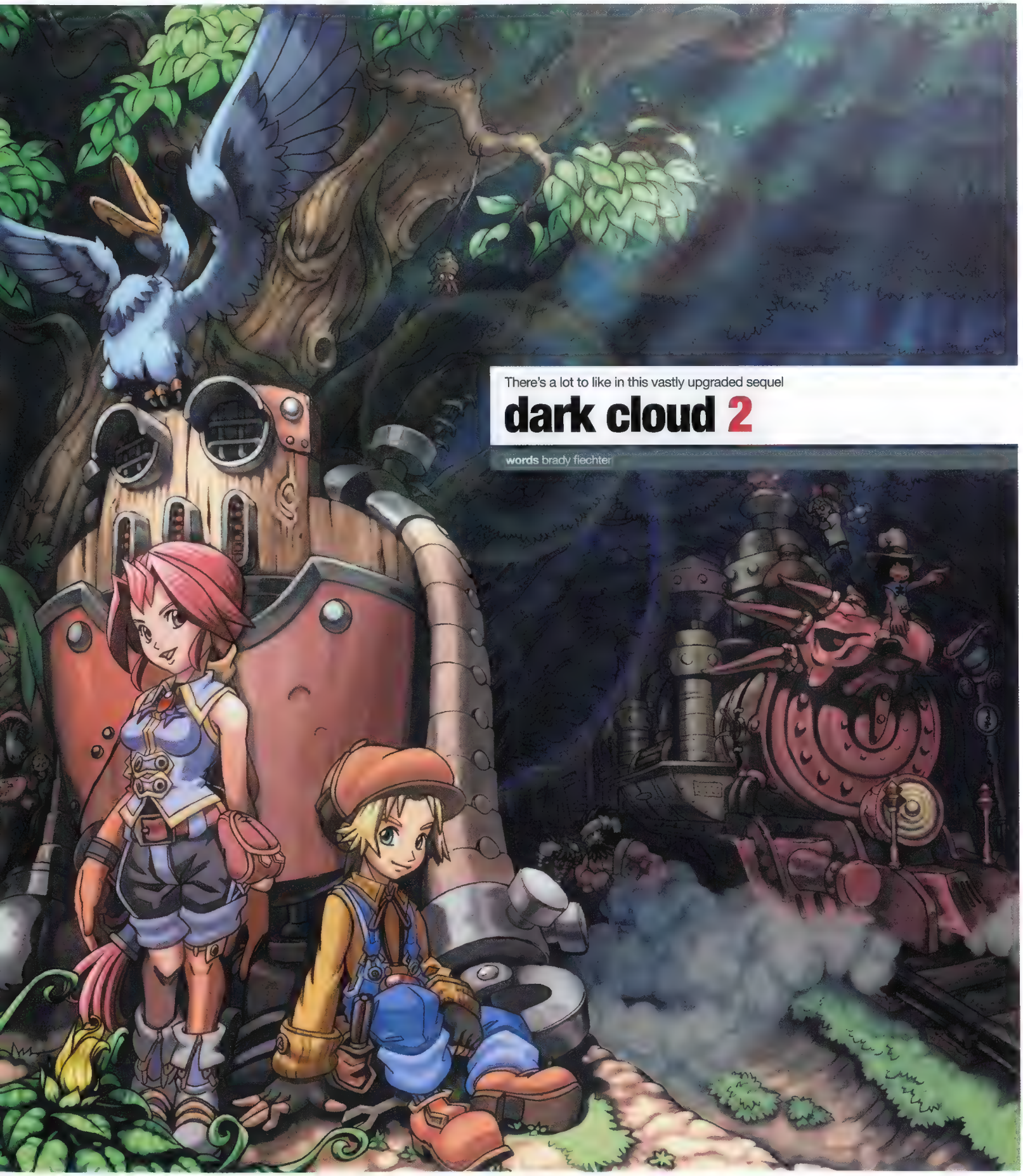
Globox puts a damper on their pelt-peeling parade by swallowing the Chief Black Lum, but now he's very sick, and strangely (and fiercely) addicted to plum juice. So it's off to see the Teensies they go; first to fix Globox, and then on to stop the Dark Lums from turning the world into a Marilyn Manson video. Part of what makes this voyage so fantastic is John Leguizamo, who plays Globox. As celebrity-voiced vid-game characters go (which is usually into the crapper), a standard has now been set. The Teensies are great again too, especially the Doctors, but Leguizamo steals the show.

The base gameplay — platforming, shooting, hovering, and grappling — has received a new lease on life, courtesy of Rayman's new forms: the Shock Rocket, Heavy Metal Fist, Lock Jaw, Vortex Fist, and Throttle Copter. Dispensed by rescued Teensies at key points throughout the game, they are the hinge on which the gameplay hangs, opening the door to some classic platforming and shooting action set amongst backdrops that you'll simply not believe. Rayman 3's most awesome attribute, as incredible as the movies, dialogue, and gameplay are, is a level of visual splendor that defies everything I've come to know about lighting and effects in a video game. The mist, powdery light, and skies, coupled with the soundtrack — easily one of the best in years — equal virtual crack. And if you liked Rez, when you see the between-level craziness — Psychedelic Skate — you simply will not believe your eyes.

I wish there were a magic trigger I could pull to coax you to buy this game, because to me, it's what we've been building towards all of these years, as technology has crept up to meet developers' visions; not bassist violence or gratuitous sex, but the ability to remove us from reality. Metroid Prime, Zelda: Wind Waker, Primal, and an array of new hopefuls all hold this promise as gaming continues up the evolutionary ladder.

rayman 3: hoodlum havoc play rating

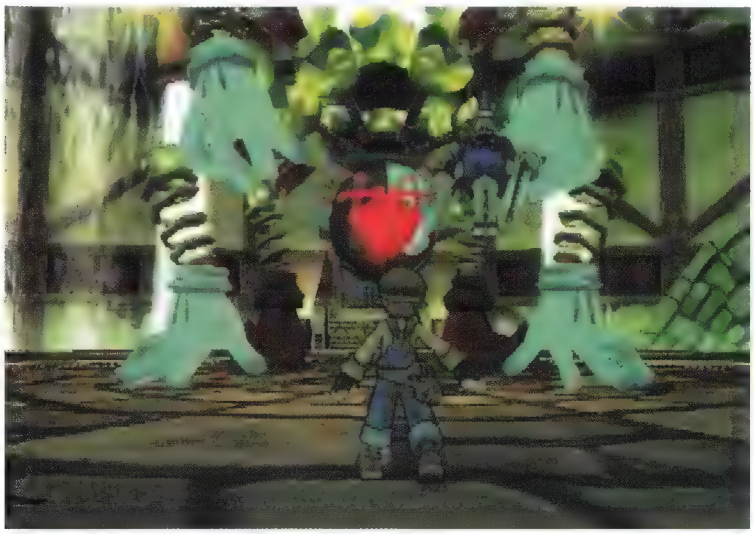
system: **playstaion 2, xbox, gamecube** / developer: **ubi soft** / publisher: **ubi soft** / available: **now**



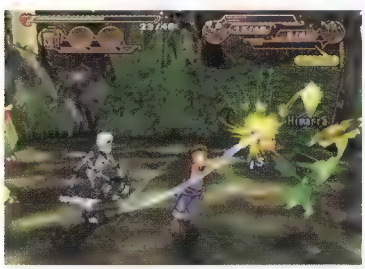
There's a lot to like in this vastly upgraded sequel

dark cloud 2

words brady fiechter



Love, love, love the character designs



The art style in this game is warm and beautiful, charming you instantly

Early in the charming Dark Cloud 2, our inquisitive young hero Max leaves the isolated comfort of his small town for a chance to see the wonders of the outside world. He's a dreamer, a precocious inventor who loves knowledge and the exciting possibilities the search for it brings. Navigating a maze of sewers and removing the monsters that live there with a wrench, he escapes to the outside, captivated by the magic of this new place: "It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen..."

I love moments like this in a role-playing game—the discovery of a new place, a character's wide-eyed yearning for adventure, the way we become a part of this journey into the land of fantasy. Dark Cloud 2 is not the best example the genre has to offer, weighing down the more enchanting qualities with poor design choices and banal, inconsequential storytelling, but there is so much to like about the game that we eventually look past the inadequacies and soak in the magic.

Like most gaming heros, Max is the chosen one, forced into the role of hero with sudden urgency and little room for argument. Dark Cloud 2 sows the seeds of its tale quick and shallow, revealing that Max possesses a pendant that somehow is the key to dreadful power—power that, when channeled by the side of evil, only means world domination. Boo to the dull motivation, bravo to the more interesting moments that come out of the early setup. Joining Max in his cause is the cute and equally adventurous Monica, a traveller from the future. She's a fast little thing who's nasty with the magic and nasty with the speak, representing the bold confidence to her friend's innocence.

Throughout the adventure, all sorts of things can be crafted, weapons enhanced and reconstructed, and you're constantly forced to monitor the damage on your gear and strategize ways to create the strongest, most reliable tools. The game hinges on building things, and like the first Dark Cloud, even the construction of entire towns is placed in your hands. Time travel is eventually revealed as the source to a lot of the problems going down, and repair and calculated construction sites are a must to fend off the damage of the consequences of villainous intentions: "Griffon has sent his henchmen to this time, altering the origin points of my time." Yes, the story is light and holds few ideas or plausibility, but you go with it as you often do with a game like this, and ultimately its hold comes from the gorgeous looks and enjoyable mechanics anyway.

Dark Cloud 2 is wonderfully appealing with its warmth and majestic use of color and tone, but perhaps even more of a delight are the endlessly imaginative character designs. From the first boss battle forward, the game exerts its splendid spirit of uncharted fantasy. Moving through this colorful place is contained mostly within labyrinthine passages; it's a dungeon game, but a dungeon game that trades in the typical tedium for much more story, character interaction, travel and discovery. The action is fierce and key battles intense, made smooth and effortless with a lock-on targeting system and just enough maneuverability and attack variations to keep it moving at an engaging pitch.

Games today love to include spoken dialogue, and Dark Cloud 2 has more than enough to please those who want it and grate those who don't. I don't, because it's never quite good enough, and the actors often have such thin material to work with. Here we get professional work, yet it comes off lifeless and horribly paced; the game is directed to be read and watched, not listened to, and I found myself fast forwarding almost immediately.

A game like Dark Cloud 2 would, I argue, be much more effective if the emphasis was placed on a more flowing, cohesive world structure, but for what it sets out to accomplish, it deserves minor criticism. This team shows heart and talent—it's obvious why they were chosen to create Dragon Quest VIII—but there still remains some heavy baggage that keeps it from truly soaring.

"...I love moments like this in a role-playing game—the discovery of a new place..."

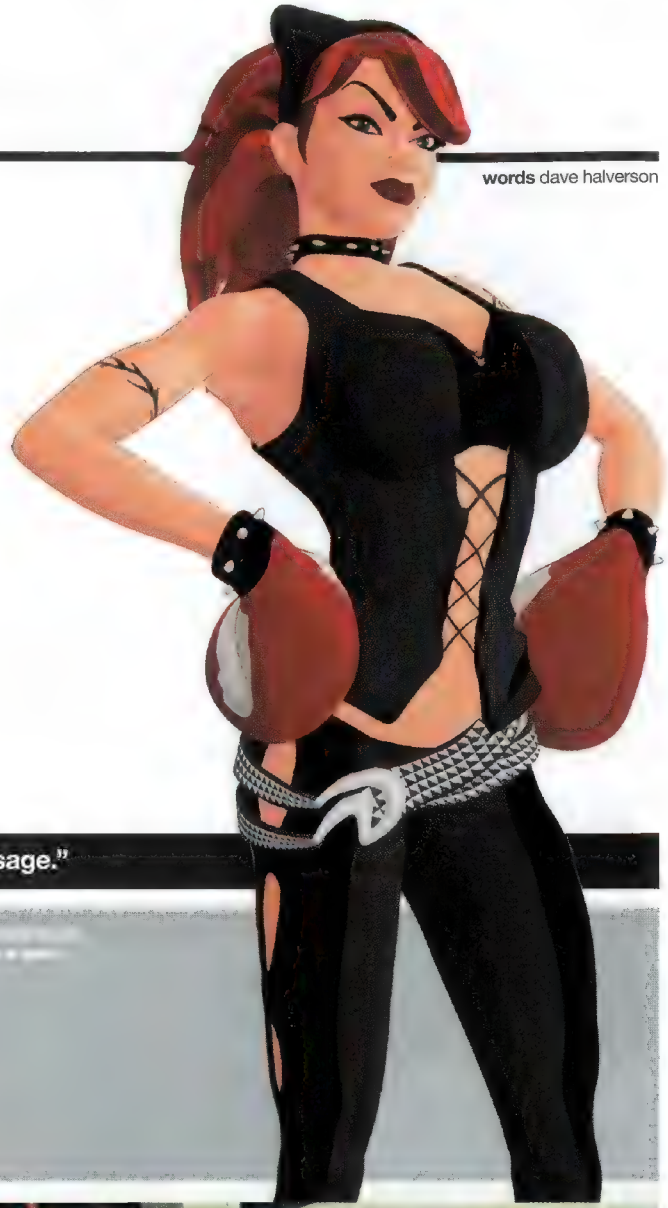
dark cloud 2

play rating

system: **playstaion 2** / developer: **level five** / publisher: **sony** / available: **now**

Toon-time boxing gets a new lease on life

black & bruised



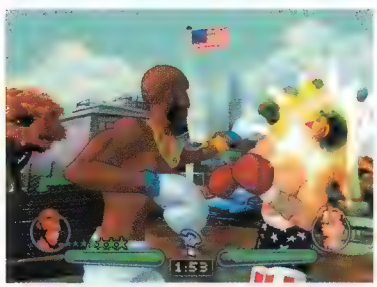
words dave halverson

Majesco may have started out in the traditional small-shop manner, recruiting has-beens and wannabes for the GBA and big three, but they've quickly found the key to unlocking the secret of success: franchise players. While BloodRayne continues to infect minions across the land on her way to becoming a mega hit game and perhaps film star, Black & Bruised is waiting in the wings hoping to do for cartoon boxing on the 'Cube and PS2 what Punch-Out!! did for the NES—a tall order. On the surface B&B looks like a garden-variety toon-town boxer with a cel-shaded veneer, but peering under the hood, an array of nuances argue that there's more here then meets the eye.

The game system revolves around boxing (of course) with an emphasis on power-up accumulation, and more importantly, usage. Connecting clean head and body blows builds your star power up to three increments to be used in conjunction with the given power-up highlighted in the character's power bar. Some drain power, some kick booty, and others have adverse effects on you, so using the right power at the right time is key, along with mastering the game's immense combo system to amass power as quickly as possible. Add to this lifestyle variables thrown in during the game's best mode, Boxer's Life, and you've got yourself a seriously well-rounded pounder to go with those pretty graphics. Even though the boobs don't bounce, every other aspect of these models, especially the character design, is quite lovely. It's also nice to see a game where winning isn't everything, and where button mashing is an exercise in futility.

There is, however, a fly buzzing around the ointment. While each individual boxer's signature music is entirely in tune with their caricature, the stage music is mostly limp and repetitive, a strange turn of events in an otherwise nicely polished game. There's also the chant of crowds when there is nary a soul in site. Audio mishaps aside, an array of modes, camera angles, and worthwhile secrets to uncover make Black and Bruised a formidable fighting contender, especially on GameCube. Holding back the game to plug in new systems and add polish was a wise move on Majesco's part. It may not have the impact Punch-Out!! had but in this day and age, what boxing game could?

"The game system has an emphasis on power-up accumulation and usage."



black & bruised

play rating

system: **gamecube, playstation 2** / developer: **digital fiction** / publisher: **majesco** / available: **now**

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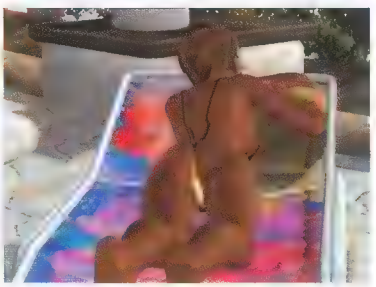
The ultimate getaway, courtesy of Team Ninja

dead or alive
xtreme beach volleyball

words dave halverson



As I continue to obsess over what equates to the Barbie of video games, I'm beginning to question my sanity. When I'm not opening gifts from Zack (a rich freak, played by none other then girly-man Dennis Rodman, with piles of cash, a jet pack, and an affinity for the ladies) I'm playing dress-up (trying on progressively smaller "swim" suits rapidly approaching floss status), listening to the Spice Girls and other such chicky tunes, cavorting around the pool, shopping, and kicking (or sometimes just watching) ass on the beach…all before sundown. Then by night I'm off to the casino to replenish the money, before going back to my room to watch videos, paint my nails, or maybe wrap a gift before tucking my sultry, tan loins into bed…I'm a hot chick — so this is what it's like.

Each morning begins another day of heavenly abandon on the beaches, jungles and amenities around Zack Island — a chick-laden tropical paradise that would turn Will straight. The compound's not unlike those found throughout the annals of Hong Kong cinema where a given evil overlord invites fighters to compete for his own mega-maniacal goals — only instead of an overlord we get a rich egomaniac and instead of sweaty men we get hot babes playing the bounciest sport known to man. I believe Zack has thought the whole lair thing through a bit more thoroughly then his predecessors: "Oops, forgot to invite the DoA guys, my bad."

Beneath the gorgeous veneer that is every inch of this game is more than a novelty in terms of depth. The volleyball is beautiful — simple, nuanced, and gorgeous — and beyond what seems like a shallow experience lays a deeply addicting, voyeur/action/gambling/shopping simulation game. Ever hear the term "I like to watch"? Well, I do. I never thought watching could be so engulfing. These models are truly extraordinary. The breasts are wonderful (along with the shoulders, thighs, faces...) of course, but do you have any idea how difficult it is to model armpits? They are perfection, and the camera angles afforded the player to view them…limited only by your imagination…and time.

Many thousands of people will view DOA XBV in many ways, but there's no denying it's a game capable of selling systems in the new, more mature, marketplace. There's certainly a place for games like this, just as there was for Seaman and PaRappa the Rapper. Not everyone is a hardcore enthusiast, and even those of us who are enjoy a nice break, especially when it involves beautiful women and blowing up a cross-dressing NBA star with more holes in him than a pasta strainer.

"The breasts are wonderful but do you have any idea how hard it is to model armpits?"

Now that's platforming: Lisa passes some time between matches. Bless you Tecmo

dead or alive xtreme beach volleyball

play rating ●●●●◐

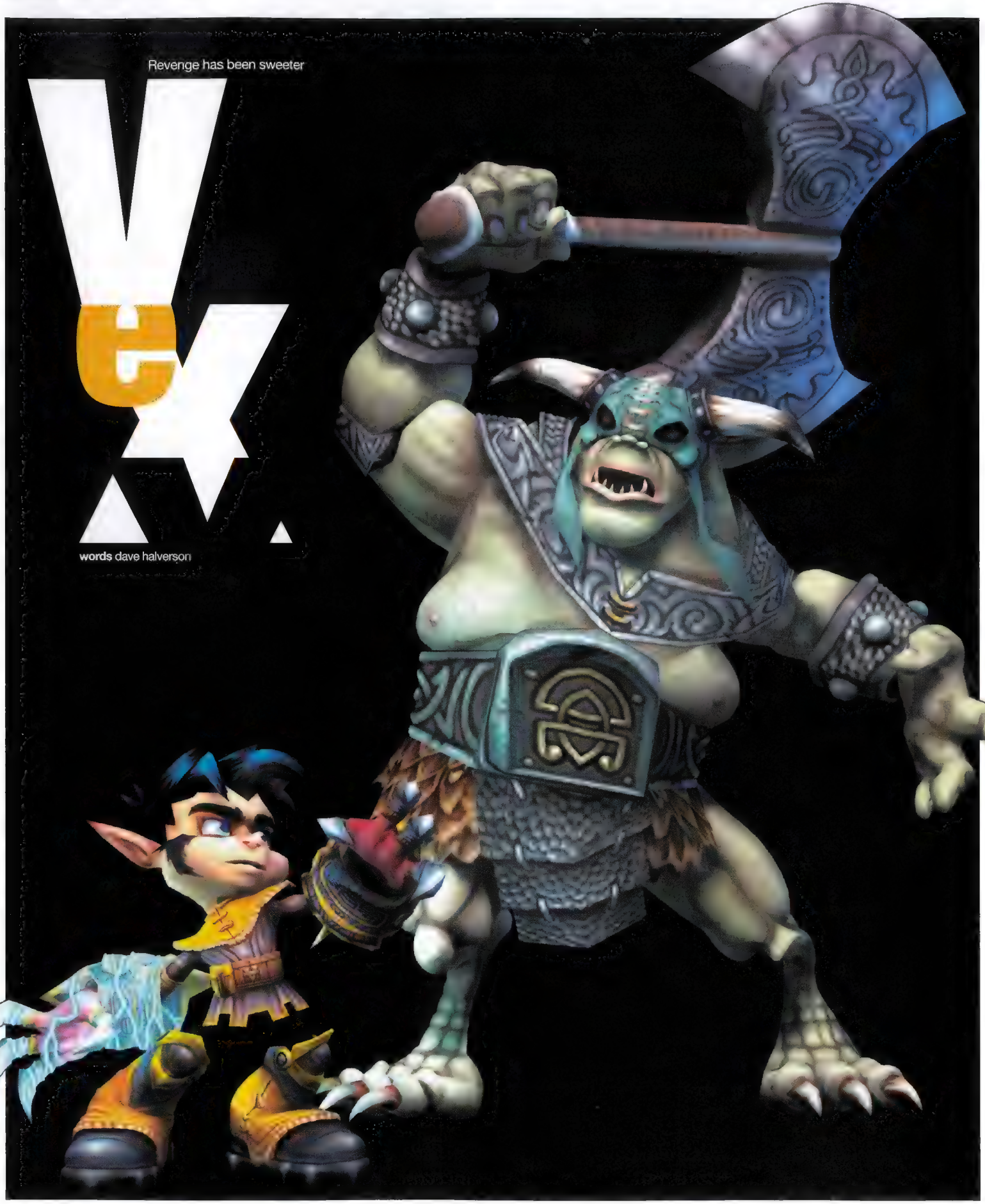
system: **xbox** / developer: **team ninja** / publisher: **tecmo** / available: **now**

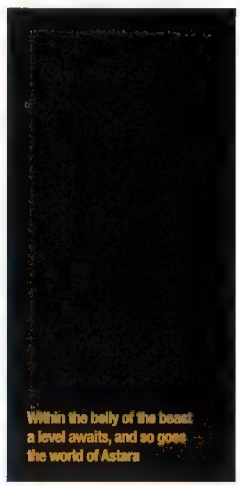
Lovers
beach

Revenge has been sweeter

Jak X

words dave halverson





Depending on which system you own, Vexx delivers a vastly different experience. On the GameCube it runs smooth, has passable textures and ranks among the console's top platformers. On Xbox, the same applies, only the textures are better (although still not on par with the system's best) and again, it ranks among the console's top platformers. On the PS2, however, the textures are only slightly better than what we experienced on N64 and as a result, it's a tougher sell versus that system's phat platforming stable. The big three create a conundrum amongst franchise players: do you tailor your game for Xbox, then dumb it down for the other two, or hit somewhere in the middle? Seeing as how the GameCube and especially Xbox have a greater need for the likes of Vexx, I suppose Acclaim made the right decision. That said, Vexx's individualism may compel PS2 users to see past those muddy textures to partake in the game's grand scale.

The Vexx modus operandi revolves around the collection of Shadowraith Hearts to bring about the liberation of Astara, which fell at the hand of the Dark Yabu, a mad ruler who enslaved and ultimately decimated his tribe (which was kinda' his fault). By feeding the Hearts to a central rift gate, Vexx can unlock portals ultimately leading to Dark Yabu, and then commence on some payback. It's a standard hub-diving formula, akin to Banjo-Kazooie or Mario Sunshine, only on a grander scale—at least that's the pitch. Centered on a simple central hub, there's no key to finding a given world (which is refreshing); rather, the secrets lie within, shrouded in secrecy described within riddles. The worlds in Vexx play host to a wide range of play types: exploration, collecting, precision platforming, epic battles, fierce puzzles, underwater excursions, time warping, flying. There's rarely a dull moment and it's all time sensitive and put to an extraordinary soundtrack. Worlds beget worlds in Vexx, as you unravel clues to discovering the hearts throughout the wondrous sprawls...well, mostly wondrous at least. My one problem with Vexx's universe is a world that just doesn't gel. Going from mystical lands reminiscent of designs by Sid Mead or Roger Dean to the tired giant-room scenario made famous by Furfighters (and the dreaded music level that always goes with it) really took me out of the game. I can't believe there's a designer out there who still thinks that running on piano keys, jumping on cymbals, and avoiding horn blasts is somehow still novel—and in a mystical setting? Hello? Somebody call a meeting; this isn't old Rayman or Tempo. Luckily, this only happens once, so I forgive you! And at least it's a fun music level. The rest of the worlds are, for the most part, magnificent, and the enemies...well, Barlowe would be proud. Puggles, Grimkins, Skinx, Hobbletrods, Krunks, Goobeasts, Floppers, and Slyphs (to name a few) are all modeled, animated, and characterized to perfection. Vexx himself is one of the best platforming characters to come around in a long time, and he's brought along a throng of serious moves, including a mean juggle and some fierce combos. The massive talons fused to his arms are pivotal in the game, and probably its single best attribute. He uses them to climb, shoot, dash, slash and ground-pound to great effect and much delight. Acclaim most definitely has a franchise on their hands, although I do have some suggestions.

Vexx was crafted by hard-core gamers—its strong point in terms of sheer satisfaction—and it shows. The exploration and especially the platforming are extremely well-tuned and totally engulfing. In addition, unlike today's forgiving-to-a-fault platformers, Vexx is all about skill: you fall...you may die. You can drown, too, or just get your ass kicked. Not to the level that it impedes gameplay (you start right there), but I like the fact you're working without a safety net, like those sweaty-palm NES, SNES, and Genesis games of old. Where Vexx needs improvement is in its at-times heavy-handed textures and squared architecture (edge blending is at a minimum and the textures too varied for the lesser-capacity consoles) and story integration, which, given its beautiful set-up, there isn't nearly enough of. Regarding the visuals, I understand the need for multi-console versions of major-budget projects for distribution and profit's sake, but I am also of the belief that each version should be created to maximize its respective system. Hey, all third-party games are guilty of blurring the lines, but I will say this: Vexx makes the most of its pedigree. I love the music, the gameplay, the universe, and the level design—and that's an awful lot to love.

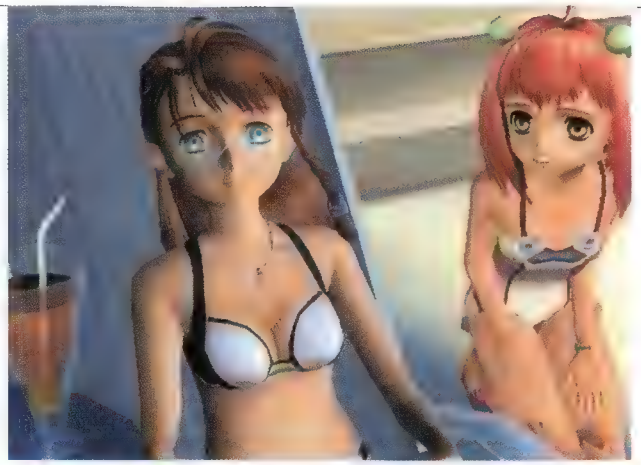
"Vexx was crafted by hard-core gamers-its strong point in terms of sheer satisfaction"

vexx play rating | xbox ●●●●◐ | gamecube ●●●●○ | playstation 2 ●●●◐○

system: **xbox, gamecube, playstaion 2** / developer: **acclaim studios austin** / publisher: **acclaim** / available: **now**

A profound introduction to an epic story

xenosaga episode 1:
der wille zur macht



As you play through Xenosaga, do not forget that it is subtitled "Episode 1." This unofficial follow-up to Xenogears will quickly envelop you in its gripping, provocative science-fiction world and absorb you into the lives of its characters and their challenges. You will be pulled along roughshod through a story that questions the meaning of everything humanity holds dear, and your brain will contort as you try to untangle its *Evangelion*-like mysteries. But, as the final curtain drops, many of these mysteries will remain unsolved, and plot threads are left hanging. If you don't mind this truly episodic nature, then you'll be in for one of the most compelling RPGs to be released in quite some time.

Set against a 48th-century backdrop of mankind waging a war against a nearly unstoppable destructive force called the Gnosis (think of those nasty critters from *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*), this 50-plus hour epic is nothing short of relentless. Xenosaga unapologetically challenges our conceptions of love, death, science, and religion, and aims to confound with its multifaceted plot. Just what are the Gnosis? What do they have to do with the game's heroine, Chief Engineer Shion Uzuki? And what is the true nature of Shion's creation, the female anti-Gnosis android, KOS-MOS? As the occasional answer is revealed, new questions spring up, resulting in a delicious epic that doesn't release you from its enigmatic, mature, and occasionally twisted grip until the end. Characters quickly take on lives of their own, and even if you don't like all of them, you will almost assuredly care about what happens to them.

Just as the story and themes are uncompromising, so is the gameplay. Xenosaga is not a game for RPG newcomers, as players are bombarded with a bevy of attack options and customization features. Different button combinations in battle yield attacks with different attributes (somewhat like in Xenogears), and mastering the right ones is crucial to success. Aside from just leveling up through typical experience, characters gain points to improve all manner of abilities, and you can also level up individual character stats with excess points. Throw in the ability to call forth giant mechs (called AGWS) in battle, which have their own abilities and guidelines for combat, and you're faced with a number of options that borders on overwhelming—and you'll have to effectively use them all to survive the merciless boss encounters.

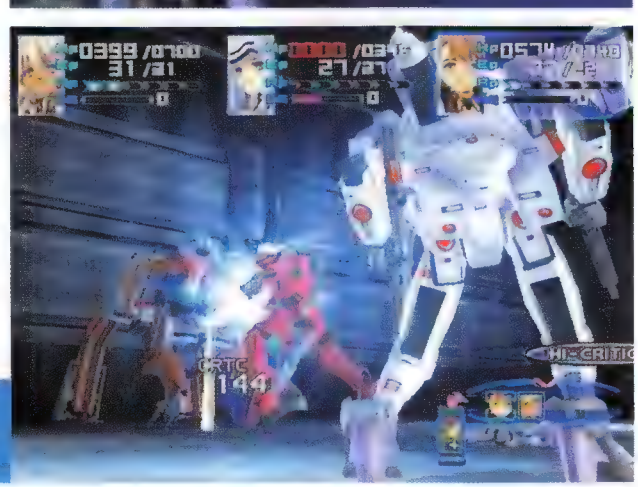
Occasionally lengthy periods of exposition and cutscenes break up the exploration and combat, but considering how intense the adventuring can be and how absorbing the story is, it's never detrimental. (Cutscenes can be skipped, if you wish.) On the other hand, if you need more of a break from the action, four minigames, including gambling, a full-blown card game, and overly complex Virtual On-style mech battles, offer a reprieve.

As engrossing as all the gameplay and story elements are, though, the single best aspect of Xenosaga may be its audio. The beautiful score, crafted by Yasunori Mitsuda (Xenogears, Chrono Trigger), perfectly reflects the drama and emotion that flows through the game. Appropriately epic tunes feel as though they are the true audio representation of futuristic combat and the vastness of space, while softer, often sadder sounds speak directly to the heart in the more poignant moments. The vocal ending themes are particularly touching. The designers also prove that less is more, as the dungeon segments are generally without music, and instead rely on great use of ambient sound to immerse the player.

Graphically, Xenosaga is also incredible, possibly even better than Final Fantasy X. The often clinical representation of the future is wholly believable, and the character designs are top notch.

A few flaws keep Xenosaga from technical perfection. Menus are a bit clumsy, and for some reason, Monolith ignored the decade-old standard of showing whether equipment in stores will positively or negatively affect your characters' stats. You can't equip characters directly from the store menu either. Also, the role of the AGWS is minor and seems to be something of an afterthought.

However, the lack of story resolution could be perceived as the game's biggest flaw. My advice: don't let it get to you. Xenosaga is designed to be episodic, and it certainly works to avoid the pitfalls of its predecessor (that's right, Xenogears fans…the story is *not* half-told by a character sitting in a chair in a dark room). Instead of wishing for all the answers now, just savor the intensely dramatic sci-fi story, hardcore play mechanics and superb aesthetic. Contemplate its many mysteries, and eagerly await the second installment. For now, Xenosaga is just about as good as it gets for RPGs.



AGWS combat adds variety to the gameplay, even if it is a rather minor addition in the overall scheme of things.

"Xenosaga unapologetically challenges our conceptions of love, death, science, and religion, and aims to confound with its multifaceted plot."

xenosaga episode 1: der wille zur macht

system: **playstaion 2** / developer: **monolith** / publisher: **namco** / available: **now**

play rating ●●●●●

Everybody really is kung-fu fighting

kung fu chaos

words dave halverson

A console is shaped by its first-party franchises, a fact that Microsoft are obviously well aware. Forget all you've read about Kung Fu Chaos — comparisons to the likes of Power Stone, or it being a straightforward action romp — and enter this dragon; your starring role in Kung Fu Theatre awaits, cheese generously incruded.

As one of 10 unique wannabe action stars, you're on the set and in the film, taking cues from a fat, rude, stumpy, buck- toothed, near sighted, B-movie director as he rates your performance scene-by-scene as the shoot progresses. Orchestrated beautifully by Just Add Monsters (a division of Argonaut), you're drawn into the intricacy of KFC's play mechanics slowly and methodically as the filming progresses, taking 5 in between scenes for training. KFC's sheen lies in the game's lampoon brought to vivid life through brilliant scripting, excellent progression, and lines like "You have learned my teaching, this is as it should be!" that are truly fall-on-the-floor funny. From scratchy prints to the abusive commands of the director, KFC frames its action as well as any game in any genre; polish that graduates into stages that take twitch action gaming to new single and multi-player heights. Deep play mechanics that incorporate the best aspects of fighting games and beat-em-ups is the key.

As a single player experience, you could play KFC for weeks unlocking all of its treasures, but it serves a table of four nearly as well. Four player is way manic, and therefore not as precise (seeing as how you spend as much time beating off your friends as you will opponents), but most enjoyable when it comes to sheer fun. And with two people focused on the gameplay (not kicking each other's ass) KFC is the best buddy game since Dashin' Desperados. If you don't know what that is and have access to a Genesis, I highly recommend finding out.

We often speak in this industry of "playing a movie" and while this may not be exactly what we had in mind, maybe it should be. With mind-blowing visuals, music, dialogue, and animation to die for, KFC is the most filling Chinese you may ever encounter.

"As a single player experience you could play KFC for weeks unlocking all of its treasures"

kung fu chaos

play rating

system: **xbox** / developer: **just add monsters** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **now**

Just in time for the SP, the quintessential 2D Rayman

rayman 3

words dave halverson

Anyone around for it likely has fond memories of Rayman's first appearance on the gaming scene back in 1995. It was the single best game ever for the Jaguar, and was among a select few high-quality hand-drawn action games available for the otherwise barren PlayStation (only Castlevania SotN, Mega Man 8, and Lomax in Lemmingland spring to mind on the US side). Nevertheless, even on the Saturn, amidst stiff competition like Astal, Three Dirty Dwarves, Earthworm Jim 2, Mega Man 8, Princess Crown, and the legendary Guardian Heroes (to name a few), the same applied. Imagine a return to that moment in 2D gaming—only on the world's greatest portable game system—and that's Rayman 3 for GBA. As beautiful a game Rayman was, this sequel actually looks and plays even better.

Although there are similarities between this and the new R3 console games — Globox has swallowed a Dark Lum and it's up to Rayman to find someone to extract it (apparently puking is prohibited in Wanderwood Forest) — this version is more akin to Rayman 2: The Great Escape. As such, über-runt Razorbeard and his dimwitted mates are back (God, I missed them) as well as the lovely Ly who looks yummy hand drawn. Of all the returning characters, however, none is as welcome as Sam the Snake, who tugs us through some truly inspired 3D on the GBA. Also like Escape, but new to Rayman's side-scrolling escapades, there's now a central hub linking the many splendid worlds; speaking of which, the art is astonishing. The thickets Rayman climbs now have cutout collision and the level of detail overall is everything you'd expect from a next-generation hand-drawn Rayman, as is the music. With the new Game Boy Advance SP just over the horizon, handheld games of this magnitude take on a whole new life. 2D is now not only back but thoroughly enjoyable.

rayman 3

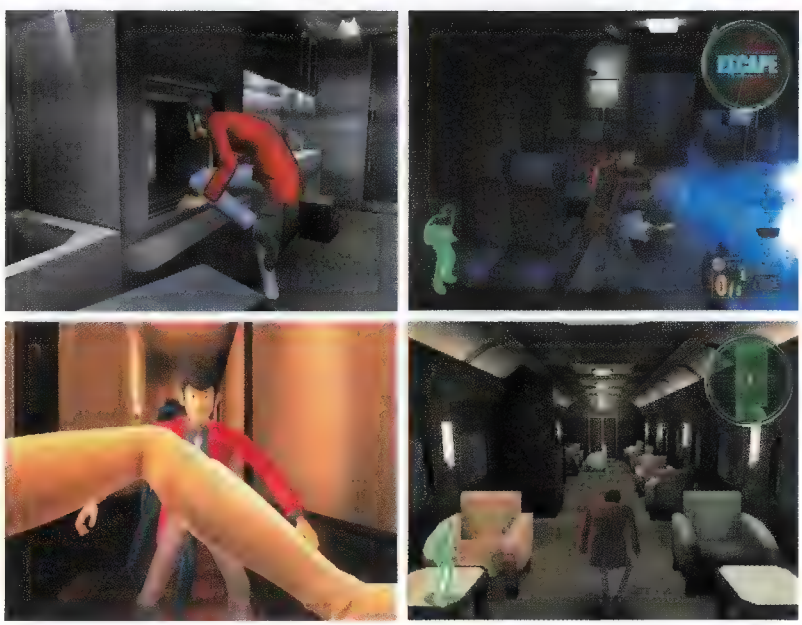
play rating ●●●●◐

system: **game boy advance** / developer: **ubi soft** / publisher: **ubi soft** / available: **now**

Calling all US third parties...Look! It's Lupin!

lupin majutsu oh no isan

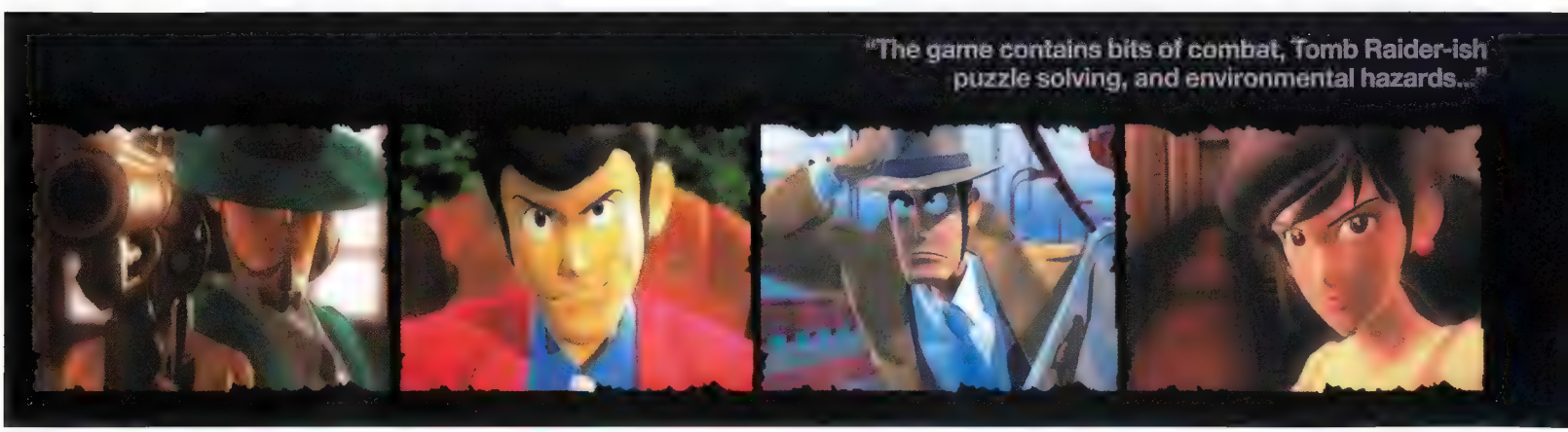
words dave halverson



Stealth gaming Lupin style; what could be better?

He's a master thief, smooth as a baby's butt, gets all the ladies, and now he's (finally) starring in a game worthy of his namesake. Why'd it take so long for one of anime's biggest stars, Lupin the Third, to get a descent game gig? Well, let's just say that anime franchises don't often get the call when it comes to high-dollar action games, dining instead on a scrap bin of digital comics, strategy, simulation, or the odd quirky shooter. Midway through the genesis of the PS2, however, Banpresto has stepped up and put out a quality Lupin adventure true to its roots in every way, interlaced with gorgeous CG, high production values, and a super-cool Lupin-style soundtrack.

The game contains bits of combat, Tomb Raider-ish puzzle solving, and environmental hazards, but the brunt of it hinges on what Lupin does best: slinking around past guards, via disguise or Metal Gear-like stealth. When discovered, Lupin never shoots to kill, finding it much more of a challenge to gas his victims, rifle through their pockets, or steal their clothes, and he does so with all of the vivid expression and pride he boasts in his countless adventures on film. Night vision, deception, code breaking...whatever it takes, Lupin has the skills. He's also got an entourage and they're all in the game: Jigen—ex-mafia, chain smoker, handgun extraordinaire; Fujiko—Lupin's female equivalent and love interest; Goemon the super samurai; and of course Kusanagi, the cop who's been tailing him since forever, right on his tail at every turn. The models are first-rate, the control and interface a joy, and the music paints a smirk on your face the whole way through. If someone doesn't pick this one up for a stateside release, well, I pity the fool. If you don't see it soon, the import is hard to find but worth the effort. Thankfully, the clues all have visuals as does the menu, so it's pretty easy going. We'll look under every rock for a US release and if we don't find one, we'll try to get it picked up. If that doesn't work, well, it's every man for himself.



lupin majutsu oh no isan

play rating

system: **playstation 2** / developer: **banpresto** / publisher: **banpresto** / available: **now (japan)**

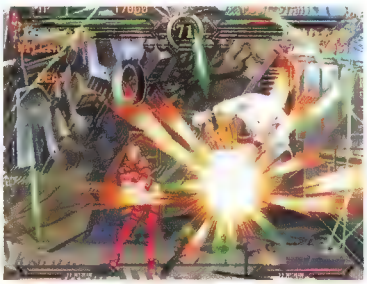
Metal Dungeon

system: xbox
developer: panther software
publisher: panther software
available: now

Besides the background-turning nature of the dungeons, how much pleasure you derive from MD may depend on preference. As an RPG it's bare bones, with no towns or outer worlds to explore; however, as a strategic dungeon diver it does have its merits. MD features a distinctively PSO interface, where you choose from five classes to assemble your party (most scant on character design, I'm afraid), and venture into 100 dungeons requiring some 80 to 100 hours of gameplay to conquer, weaving through metallic structures as a group of Enforcers attempting recapture a research facility from the rogue cyborg Magin. A tinge of *Event Horizon* looms in the air, but is under-realized due to the puzzling nature of the control. What should be so easy on Xbox is strangely overlooked. The fighting system too, is formidable, but has peculiar issues. Metal Dungeon is like a smorgasbord: it's all you can eat, but it doesn't taste all that good.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating



Guilty Gear X2

system: ps2
developer: sammy studios
publisher: arc system works
available: now

Now you can shout at the devil anytime, anywhere, with the pinnacle of handmade 2D fighters: Sammy Studio's stunning Guilty Gear sequel, X2. Eight modes of play and six new fighters accentuate X2's trademark systems (Overdrive Attacks, Instant Kills, Gatling Combos and Roman Cancels) lovingly bathed in drop-dead gorgeous gothic visuals and stunning character designs, carried on a soundtrack worth crossing over for. As well as this fighter plays (it's like a drug) and as deep as it is, it's the animation that keeps me coming back for more. What I wouldn't give to see these characters in a 2D side scrolling action game. This is an essential purchase if you're into fighters, but you knew that.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating

ATV Quad Power Racing 2

system: **playstation 2/xbox/gamecube**
developer: **climax motorsports**
publisher: **acclaim**
available: **now**

Not quite living up to the majesty of the Xbox version, ATV Quad Power Racing 2 still helps fill a gap in the GameCube's ever-burgeoning arsenal as a very formidable off road racer. The game gets its juice from incorporating Gran Turismo-like elements (driving tests open up new quads and develop your skills) with solid arcade-style racing enriched through preloading, quality physics, and lovely graphics. The textures on display, along with the fine details like kicking up dust and splashing the screen as you assail riverbeds, are truly impressive.

Ten pro riders join the fray along with ten fantasy characters; from scantily clad swamp rats to fully geared-up moto-heads, but the variables are in the quads, not the characters, so this is a matter of taste. Boost is gotten by performing tricks but isn't a necessity to sweep races, and the balance overall through the career ranks is right on the money. So, what's not to like about QPR2? Well, not much, other than the fact that the riders always stand up (which is peculiar) and are slightly lacking in the animation department. The quad models aren't so hot either, devoid of reflection mapping or fine detail; but this is an almost moot point seeing as how you rarely have the opportunity to zoom-in on such goodies, as there are no replays — the game's only real pitfall.

If you own multiple consoles—although the game is solid across all three platforms — the Xbox game takes the prize, with eight competitors to the GC and PS2's six, along with a four-player mode compared to the other consoles' two. PS2 owners in possession of ATV Offroad Fury 2, however, need not apply. That game's majesty and dominance over this scant category remains well intact.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating

War of the Monsters

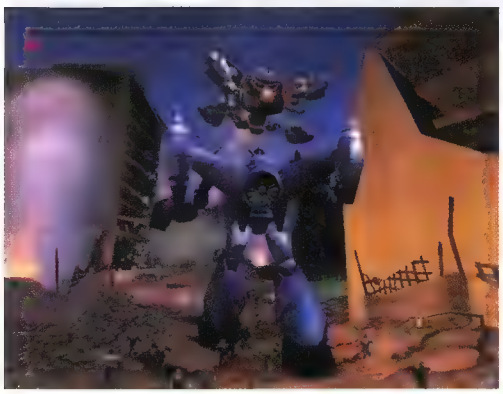
system: playstation 2
developer: incog
publisher: scea
available: now

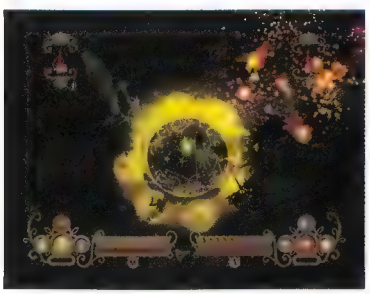
A huge fan of monster movies since I was knee high to Mini-Me, I have *Godzilla, Gamera, King Kong*, and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* as etched in my mind as old Bowie songs and Halle Berry's lounge act in Swordfish. The fact that it took game companies so long to capture this golden era is the real shocker, but with Infogrames' Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters behind us Sony's War of the Monsters about to cap off the category, vintage Hollywood and Japanese monster movies are now swathed in quality gaming.

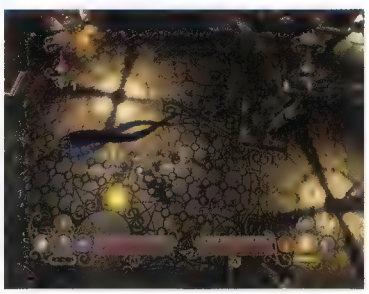
War of the Monsters comes wrapped in such a nicely polished retro package that you begin thinking of ways past its shortcomings with each passing minute. Diving right into the game's adventure mode, fresh from the slick drive-in movie interface adorned with '50s finned gas-guzzlers and the options screen in the snack bar, the first couple of fights give you the impression that the murky control can be compensated for by running for cover and getting your bearings behind the buildings. This works for a while, but on the heels of the first boss (which is great, by the way) things heat up considerably, casting a bright light on this otherwise masterful game's Achilles' Heel...the engine's stubborn hold on the game's control. Background turning (and the over-steer that goes with it), lack of a quick turn, and loose control overall cannot be mended, given its axis-based nature. Strafing helps, but when you've got an airborne enemy flying away to gobble up regenerating health every time you're about to finish him off, things can get a tad frustrating. As a result, War of the Monsters weighs in on the hard side mainly because of its balance and control issues, rather than its AI. These shortcomings, however, can be compensated for and ultimately overcome, but they bear mentioning. I've read too many reviews that speak only to this game's exterior, for which it deserves major props, but tight, it isn't. Everything else — knockoffs of every retro monster imaginable, traversing movie motifs, using and obliterating their environments while annihilating each other — is as it should be, and done to near perfection.

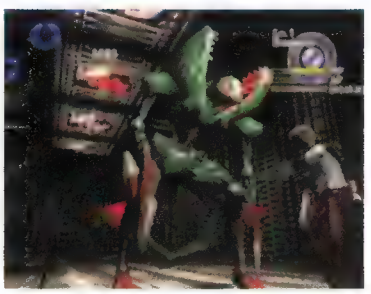
DAVE HALVERSON

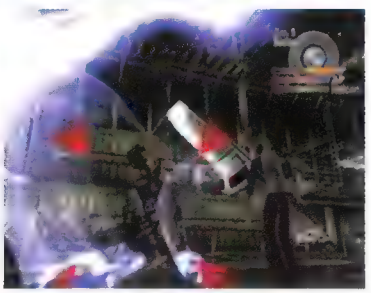
play rating











NightCaster 2

system: xbox
developer:
publisher:

NightCaster 2 is a throwback to the top-down shooters of yester-year and it's a formidable one at that, stacked in color-coded magic mayhem and bump-mapped with love. I do, however, so wish that it were a sequel more true to its roots. NightCaster was a gorgeous, addicting action game that got a raw deal in the press. Had they just stuck to that formula, adding bump-mapping and gameplay refinements, Equinox would be downright celebratory. But as it is, NightCaster 2 is still a tough-as-nails, manic, top-down shooter (something I always have room for) with a deep magic system and a healthy (yet somewhat misplaced) techno soundtrack in tow. Were the characters less wooden and a tad more responsive, four stars would have been its fate. Now make the real sequel.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating

Galerians

system: xbox
developer:
publisher:
available:

In the cooly ambient but unimpressive Galerians, Rion, our drug abusing hero of the distant future has been gifted the ability to discharge his mental energy in the form of nasty attacks. The most satisfying taking the form of a scanner's like head pop. I like the look of Galerians, especially the icy cool character designs, but after a while there wasn't enough flavor to the game to keep me strongly interested. In a game that gets tied down by monotonous backtracking through limited settings, the lack of story progression and dramatic scripting becomes even more damaging. The underpod end of the game eventually saves its best and utterly wrecking the monotonous five hour experience into the deep freeze.

BRADY FIECHTER

play rating

Robocop lives

To help celebrate their upcoming Robocop game, Titus set the stage for some one on one with one of the most acclaimed sci-fi directors in the world. It's time to fall in love with Robocop all over again.

Interview by Brady Hechler

So let's travel back. *Robocop*—a new video game is coming out based on your movie. What do you think of games in general?
I was probably already too old when they were invented to be a complete fan of them, but I remember when I started working on *Robocop*, Ed Neumeier and I went to all these halls for video games to study them. A lot of these ideas became the thinking for *Robocop*. In the beginning of the games, they were of course not as sophisticated as they are now. But we felt *Robocop* in some way should correspond to the style or the ideas that were in video games. And I think these things are extremely interesting. I wish I was in my 20s, and I had the handiness to play these games as I see my kids and other kids playing, because I have the feeling I missed that a little bit, this electronic education.

Used to be that the film industry didn't care much about gaming. Now the floodgates are opening. In fact, Jan de Bont, your former director of photography, is doing *Tomb Raider 2*.
I was also approached for *Tomb Raider*. But I never got a copy of the script. But I felt that the first one could have been better. Story line, the narrative just wasn't adequate. I have the feeling, what I hear from Jan, that we felt the same; he told me that this is a much better narrative.

"[Ed Neumeier and I] felt *Robocop* in some way should correspond to the style or the ideas that were in video games."

But I have never looked at [video games] in a negative way. It's important to know what young people are looking at... I know people have been talking negatively in the past. But it's interesting that now so many movies are based on video games.

So would you do a Robocop sequel?
They only came to me with a vague request to do a *Robocop 4*. I discussed it with a friend of mine... And then I started to discuss it with Ed Neumeier, and we started to write down ideas, but these things take an enormous amount of time between the idea of some executive at MGM—the rights are at MGM at the moment—being interested. The moment to actually say, "let's do it," it often takes at least a year.

Well, you'd certainly make a lot moviegoers happy.
I tried very hard to make a sequel with *Troopers*, and that hasn't really worked. But they're making a direct to video *Troopers 2*, you know that?

I think Phil Tippet is directing it, right?
Absolutely. I discussed that with them, gave them input on the script, information and all that stuff, but ultimately that's something Phil is doing with Jon Davidson and Ed Neumeier more than with me.

***Robocop* has inspired games. *Troopers* has inspired designs for games, especially CG. As a filmmaker, do you wash yourself of the past, are you interested in what people are doing with your work.**
I like to know, but often I don't hear. For example, I follow what I'm more aware of. I've spent an enormous time on DVDs to give them the extras people are interested in, be it deleted scenes or storyboards, other stuff... So I have gathered all this during the shoot of the movie the past five years. With games, there have been no demands made on me. I haven't been asked to participate in this process. I would certainly do so, because it would be really fun.

You've said that your focus is to make movies more about people, delving into the human side more. Is this you changing as a filmmaker, flexing your muscles in a slightly different direction?
I think there are several reasons. Life is too complex to be driven by wrong reason anyhow. I think one of them is, of course, that after doing so many big action special effects movies, I felt that I had to return—to "return" is a very important word—return to things I had been doing when I was in Europe...

You have many fans in America because of things like *Starship Troopers* and *Robocop*, but most people don't realize you were nominated for an Academy Award for your early work.
With all the pleasure I have been deriving from doing these special effects movies, I felt like [tapping] that other side of me, like how I was before going to United States, that kind of thinking about people—a certain humanity—more feeling for warmth and support, compassion and all these sorts of things, which basically are in my European movies. All my European movies are edgy, too—to a large degree are very provocative, but they are a little bit more of looking at characters and people and soul and heart. So I had the feeling, living here in the United States for [several] years, that I had exhausted the other side of me, the child side of me, because I used my interest in the future and science fiction and action, I used a lot of things that I felt when I was in my teens, that were eventually buried by the more esoteric and artistic ... the tradition of European filmmaking. I was brought up, especially immediately after the war, by American books, movies, American sci-fi, all that stuff. To a large degree that was my world till I became a filmmaker, and in my twenties, all these things were overruled by, say, French nouveau ... which became more my world at that time. So when I came to the US, I think I let that go, that kind of artistic, esoteric thinking. So I went into my youth and used all my pleasure for science fiction and action. But after several years, after *Starship Troopers*, I felt that I should try something that would be a combination of the two—by digging into the old thinking of more people-oriented or character-oriented movies, whatever you want to call them—more how people behave, how they are, not how they behave to fit the science-fiction story line.

You brought up special effects. I think we're relying, dangerously, too much on special effects. A lot of the movies you are talking about aren't being made. People want to dazzle instead of tell a story.
I fully agree with that. And at a certain moment, there was something in me that started to resist that, and I felt more strongly, perhaps because of that last movie I did, *Hollowman*, where otherwise, in *Starship Troopers*, where I still had a strong connection with political aspects of the movie, in *Hollowman* it was really about special effects. The story itself had no transcendence in any way, you could not feel it in with anything that was living inside me. While I felt I used a lot of my political thinking, mostly about the United States, I could still use that and fill that in, like *Starship Troopers*. That's why it is much more significant to me than *Hollowman*, where I feel the special effects were the dominant factor, everybody, including the director, including the actors, including everybody, is dependant on the effects. It's like the movie was made for the special effects. And I feel that special effects should be used for something else, they should be in the service of the narrative, in the service of the characters. *Hollowman* for me brought this to the surface, and it had a reasonable success, but I discovered that I don't want to do this anymore. If it's science fiction, fine, but it has to be about something. You could argue that what Cameron did with *Titanic* would be a more reliable way of going with special effects. *Titanic* uses the special effects to portray something. The effects serve the narrative.

Ever get tired of recalling your past

works? You've said in the past you aren't the biggest fan of sci-fi, and yet you still make the movies people love. Have you felt tied down and still looking for that one project that is perfect for you?
No, I don't feel that, because ultimately you're working in an industry that is defined by give and take, and you can't exclude economics from the artistic process. So I feel that would mean I've been suffering constantly because of not doing what I wanted. But that's not the case. I wanted to do all the movies I did, but in retrospect, after having done them, I might have had second thoughts. But with a movie like *Starship Troopers*, you can see what can really be done with science fiction. There is commentary. If you analyze *Troopers*—and some people have done that, and of course we were aware of that while we were making it—it is somehow, in some way, satirizing US imperialism, of course.

And critics tend to see it differently at first. Does it feel good to be vindicated? Rather, do you feel vindicated?
It always feels good to be vindicated, although we are vindicated by something much worse, what American politics are all about. The film of course was not meant to be prophetic in any way, but you can see how American politics of nowadays are very much reflected in the movie. I am vindicated by what I see around me. It feels to me sort of a pleasant fulfillment of my dream.

What fascinates you about propaganda?
Basically that we are all the victims of propaganda.

Maybe more than ever. Last night I was watching an hour-long special about our military, and it was put together like a sappy film. I hate to admit it, but in a lot of ways, we *are* fed propaganda all the time.
Well, we all are. Unfortunately, the whole situation in the US—well, I can't say how long, because I've only been living here for so many years—but it feels to me that the US at this moment is not able to express different opinions. It's like newspapers in general are favoring in a completely... they don't think about what they're doing anymore. They seem to be following the government. There is very little critical approach to all this. Even our most sacred [publications], be it New York Times, the Washington Post, or other magazines, are not reliable anymore. Somehow they are spinning events in a direction that is favorable to the government way of thinking. And television is even worse, because it is so superficial. Basically I have the feeling, more than ever, that I am living in a situation here in the United States where I am continuously beleaguered by the stream of propaganda. Where the people are doing the propaganda, which is the media, are not even aware of what they are doing. They are nearly censoring themselves, are programmed in a way that in general they are acclaiming the government's point of view. Especially with this administration: for me it feels much worse than other administrations, while I have been living here. Because it feels like they aren't even aware that they are translating the government's point of view. That is propaganda. The critical issues are not on the table, and you can't really find them. You have to buy underground news, like The Nation or The Progressive, or listen to KPFK or something like that, if you want to get an unbiased... Well, not unbiased, because everyone's biased—at least get another point of view that can correct the situation we are living with in the normal media... But I have a feeling—looking at what is happening, how the government is continually spinning, spinning, spinning, especially with Iraq, especially with Israel, in a way they want to be true— the situation that was represented in *Starship Troopers* became the nightmare of now.

You obviously have strong political opinions, tend to have several political undercurrents running through your movies. You seem to ridicule that flag-waiving mentality.
That certainly depends on the movie. You are trying to have different goals. If you think, All my movies must have a political dimension, that would be wrong too. If you look at *Total Recall*, that it not so much a political aspect I tried to develop, it was more a philosophical aspect. It is more the essence of reality, the post modern idea of a double reality, a dream and a nondream, and keeping these levels going on at the same time. With *Basic Instinct*, I wanted to make what I have called a Hitchcock for the 90s. Expressing my enormous admiration, inspiration, and dedication of Hitchcock work. I think *Basic Instinct*, to a large degree, is referring to *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*, *North by Northwest*. In *Robocop*, I think it is more of a commentary on urban society, where *Troopers* is more of a commentary on politics in general.

What is your general opinion of the American film-going audience? I know you've expressed interest in working in Europe again. Where does this desire come from?
I feel that the American audience is really interesting, and to be with them in a theater is much more interesting than in Europe, because the reaction of the audience is much more like living with the movie, expressing themselves more. It's more informative, more stimulating. The audience cannot make decisions, they can't say let's have this, let's have that. We as filmmakers need to try and bring that in to our movies. To live in the United States has been an extremely inspirational way of living... I've expressed in interviews before, in Europe there are more slights of gray. And basically you don't care one way or another. Whatever government is in power, who cares, it's always the same government, because everyone agrees anyhow. If you call it liberal or socialists, the socialists are liberal and the liberals are socialists. You never see opposing views. There is no dialectic between the parties... Here, it is perhaps a super dialectic process with enormous extremes. It's a situation that is extremely inspiring for artists, very dramatic. It pulls you into this world in a more confrontational way than I ever felt in Holland.
I'd like to integrate some European history into my movies. Like gladiator did. Or to a certain degree, titanic. Something to do with European history, but that's not to say I want to do history movies on Europe. As a nostalgic thought, not to forget where my roots are. But ultimately I think working in the United States with all the antagonism you might feel when you open the newspaper in the morning, be it the supreme court, or the government, is highly inspiring.

robocop

Part man. Part machine. All cop. The future of law enforcement. He was RoboCop, and for many — present company included — he rocked the very foundation of our sci-fi worlds. When Peter Weller's arm went sliding across the floor to the gut-busting laughter of his assailants, I didn't know whether to spew kernels or stand and cheer, so I just sat there in the dark, loving every second, every moment, every scream. RoboCop would go on to the worst kind of commercialization; bad sequels (well, 2 was passable) bad games, and mediocre merchandising... But all of that is about to change. Green Ford Tempos for everyone!

Titus' new RoboCop FPS is built around the RoboCop credo — uphold the public trust, and smoke anyone who gets in the way — unfolding on the streets of a crime-addled Neo Detroit. The usual FPS rules apply, but the RoboCop aesthetic adds elements akin to a police business, arresting when killing isn't absolutely necessary, liberating civilians, and keeping drugs off the street. The drug this time around is Brain Drain (4 out of 5 Nuke users say they prefer it over their regular drug), and the pushers are dug into the city dump, just like old times. By mission two, RoboCop's snapped on a cannon arm and is knee-deep in old car parts and heavy metal. The energy... it's baby food; and the dialogue and interface, pure OCP. From the familiar clump of his walk to the twirling gun, Murphy may finally get himself a game worthy of his namesake. The enemy models could be better and we're hoping the soundtrack mimics the original film, but the gameplay so far is coming along very nicely amidst large, nicely detailed (and lit) environments that maintain a steady 60fps. I'll buy that for a dollar! (Plus or minus 48 bucks.) *–Dave Halverson*

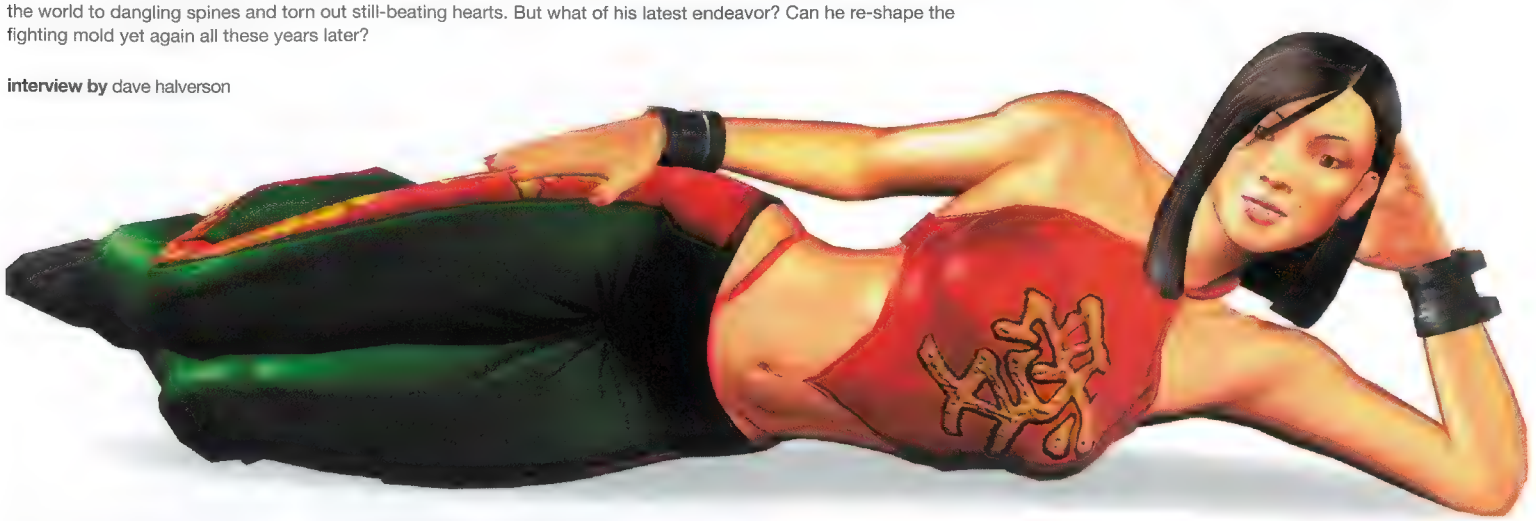
robocop

system: **playstaion 2, xbox /** developer: **titus /** publisher: **titus /** available: **q2**

Feng Shui

Jon Tobias has been crafting fighting games since the dawn of the fireball. He coined the Fatality! and introduced the world to dangling spines and torn out still-beating hearts. But what of his latest endeavor? Can he re-shape the fighting mold yet again all these years later?

interview by dave halverson



You reinvented the wheel once way back when MK and Street Fighter ruled the arcades. Since, we haven't seen much innovation in the fighting genre. Is Tao Feng fighting evolved?
Jon Tobias: Well, back then there wasn't a whole lot of history with fighting games so the field was wide open in terms doing things that haven't been done before. The innovations of late have been based more on advances in technology that allow for sweeter graphics. What's difficult with the genre now is innovating without alienating fighting game players. Tao Feng is an attempt to retain the core mechanics of a fighting game and introduce things like Limb Damage, and doing attacks off of objects, and interacting with the environments in ways that definitely evolve the fighting game experience.

I'd ask why Xbox, but the answer is obvious. Instead, can you give details on what is being done in Tao Feng that couldn't be achieved on competing consoles?
JT: Certainly the level of detail in our graphics would have been much more difficult if not entirely impossible to do on the other consoles. We did our best to create characters that don't appear boxy and to utilize as many of the bells and whistles available to us on the Xbox. I think if you look at the various stages of damage our characters and environments go through in the course of a fight, you can appreciate what the Xbox is capable of.

It must be bittersweet seeing your 2D baby ushered into the 128-bit realm, but MK DA is a formidable game cut from a predictable mold. How do feel about it as you prepare to slot Tao Feng in beside it at retail?
JT: I don't know if I'd describe it as bittersweet. It certainly is an odd feeling seeing the characters and the game that you created continue on. Even though we're competing for the same audience I am glad to see that there is still life in MK. I think the characters and property became a part of American pop culture back in the '90s. The fact that the popularity continues shows just how big of an impact we made back then.
Tao Feng doesn't have the iconic presence of Mortal Kombat because it doesn't have its history. That can be said for the majority of our competition considering that all of them have 4s and 5s next to them. This is our "1" and we feel strongly about the features in our game but we're also realistic about our place in the genre. If we're going to achieve the levels of success that the other games have, it's going to be an iterative process.

Since MK, what do you feel has changed about the fighting-game buying public? MK and SF in their day were games that could be mastered over time, like musical instruments. Do you feel that level of commitment and excitement still exists or have you designed Tao Feng differently?
JT: MK and SF existed in a time when arcades ruled. I think that a big attraction to mastering those games was that it gave a 90-pound, pimple-faced, 12-year-old kid the ability to beat the crap out of a 210-pound muscle-bound frat boy in a public place. You can't put a price on that kind of excitement and it's more difficult to recreate that kind of motivation in the home. But I think it's no secret that fighting games have to be accessible to the average player and have to also appeal to more experienced players. That is the most difficult aspect of creating a fighting game. If any player devotes hours and hours of his time mastering a character, then he should be able to beat a button-mashing newbie. If that's not the case and then the player who has committed himself to perfecting his skills has wasted his time. The trick is making the newbie feel good about

The in-game model I've dreamt about my whole life... Now there's a butt I can get behind.

"Tao Feng is an attempt to retain the core mechanics of a fighting game and introduce things like Limb Damage and interacting with the environment."

getting his butt kicked but also that he could've won had he practiced more or done things differently. It's that feeling that incites a newbie to commit to mastering any game. If he played the game for the first time and beat a practiced player — then what is his motivation for mastering the game? We designed Tao Feng with all those things in mind and learned a lot during that process.

Looking at your characters and backgrounds all we could say was, "Wow — truly inspired stuff." It's obvious that a lot of time and thought has been poured into this universe. Are these designs all your own or the result of a team think tank?
JT: The general story and character concepts came from me. Andrew Kudelka, who is one of our staff artists, and I went through several iterations for each character at their initial design phase. Andrew Arconti, also on staff here, helped create many of the designs for the alternate character costumes. We also worked with a writer named Christy Marx who helped flesh out our universe. And, we worked with a fantastic conceptual artist named Craig Mullins who helped create the look and feel of Metro China.

Speaking of teams, how large and who are the Tao Feng players?
JT: We have 12 playable characters. Six of them are members of the Black Mantis and six are members of the Pale Lotus. They're the warring clans that are featured in our story.

Our Hot Chick meter pegged during our demo with the game; how far can, and have you, taken it? Clothes do shred....
JT: David Michicich, who is our lead modeler, did an amazing job with his team of creating the realistic character models in our game. You can thank him and his team for the anatomically correct female characters. All I can say is that things get pretty skimpy.

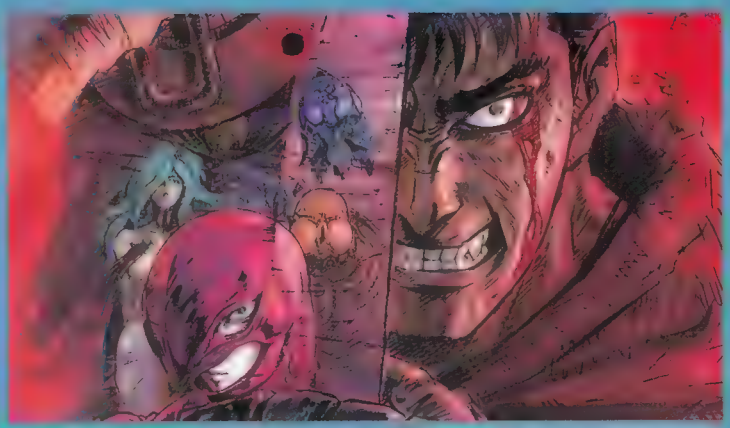
How big an impact, if any, do you feel the arcades have regarding the success of a fighter these days?
JT: Not much because I think that the majority of arcades feature location-based entertainment as opposed to the classic stand-up coin-op machines that fighting games are. So it's difficult for many people to even find an arcade much less an arcade with fighting games in them. Your best chance of finding one is by playing in the Dragon's Den Arcade in Tao Feng. It's one of our 12 environments and happens to be my favorite.

Music has always been a big part of the fighting game aesthetic; who did you recruit for Tao Feng's sound and what can we expect?
JT: Daniel Myer composed the music in our game. He's the mastermind behind the group Haujobb and is a big DJ in Europe's club and rave scene. His stuff is heavily influenced by industrial music and he's done a great job for us in setting the moods for our fights. I think the style of music that we play is a bit of a departure compared to other fighting games... but we didn't want our music to become annoying over a period of time. Rather, we wanted it to provide a good beat that exists in the background. I think that there's a tendency to pound the player on the head with loud '80s guitar rock in fighting games.

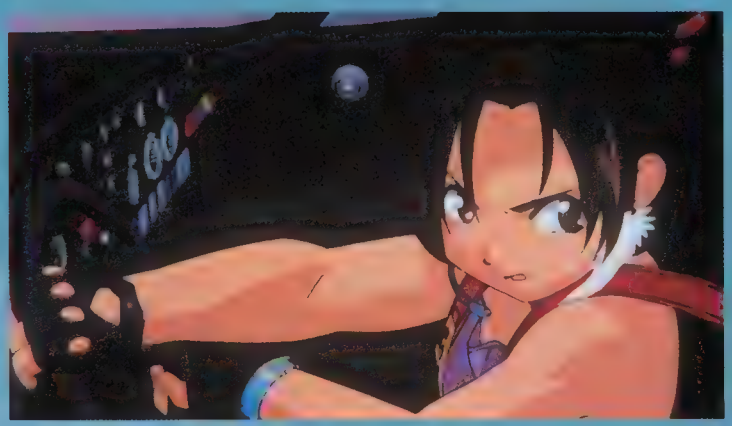
Finally, are you approaching this as an ongoing story-driven series akin to MK or SF2?
JT: Our story will definitely evolve and grow. We handled the story of Fist of the Lotus as an episode of many more to come. There is no end-of-the-world type of scenario so it's natural to simply continue on to the next chapter. Plus there are many elements to the story of our game that we only skim over. It would be nice to have a chance at revisiting and fleshing them out even further.

anime/02 year in review

010.
Berkserk

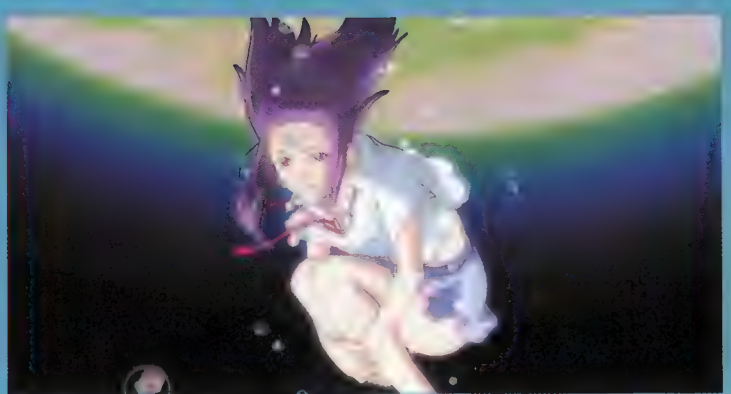


009.
eX-Driver



008.
Now and Then Here and There

007.
Arjuna



006.
Fruits Basket

studio: funimation productions / rating: 13 & up

004.
Vandread

studio: planet animation / rating: 13 & up

005.
FLCL

[illegible]-pant / rating: 13 & up

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AnimeWorks presents
SAMURAI DEEPER
KYO
キョウ
Can you hear it, Kaze no Koe.
Coming in June , AnimeWorks will unveil it's next big hit. Following in the footsteps of our chart busting releases Rurouni Kenshin and Berserk comes the first of our heavy hitters for 2003. To the everyday world, Kyoshiro Mibu is a simple dealer of herbs and medicine. But this would be Doctor carries a vicious secret just beneath his skin. Locked inside of Kyoshiro's body hides the mind of Japans most feared Samurai, Demon Eyes Kyo, Slayer of a thousand men and Kyoshiro's greatest nemisis.

003. Hellsing

studio: **pioneer animation** / rating: **16 & up**

Secretly we all want to be Vampires. No matter how much rat blood or innocent lives we may have to ingest, it's among the most romantic notions known to man. But what better than to be one that preys on the deserving in the name of humanity? Such is the plight of the Hellsing organization. Riding along with Gonzo's vampiric masterwork was one of this year's best guilty pleasures, especially when the Vatican showed up: Holy engulfing.

002. Metropolis

studio: **columbia tristar home entertainment** / rating: **17 & up**

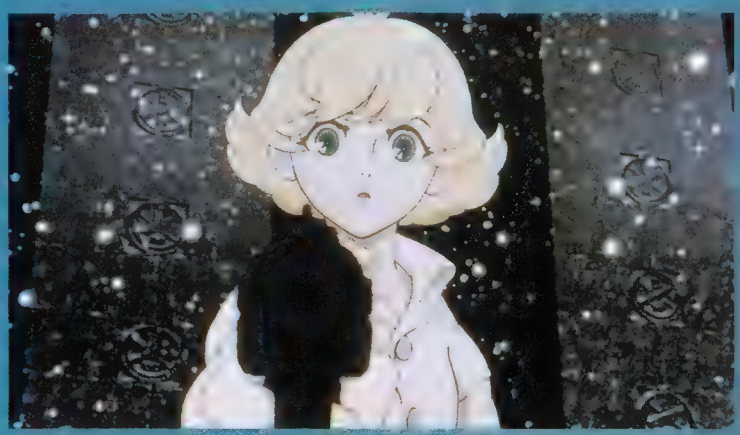
Ahh, *Metropolis*. The ingenious and heart-stoppingly beautiful film borne from the mind of the grandfather of anime, Osamu Tezuka. As if that weren't enough, *Metropolis* also boasts Katsuhiro Otomo (*Akira* creator) as its screenplay writer, and Rintaro (*Galaxy Express 999*) as its director. With such a royal pedigree, could *Metropolis* be anything but stunning? Adapted from an older manga series, *Metropolis* tells the engaging science-fiction tale of a thriving advanced city, set in the future, and riddled with political and social strife. While investigating the rubble of a ruined laboratory and in search of a criminal scientist, Kenichi discovers a strange young girl seemingly left for dead. He attempts to rescue and befriend the amnesic girl, but soon finds out that she is definitely not human. Using the latest in 2D and 3D animation technology, the exquisiteness of *Metropolis* is rivaled only by Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*. If your jaw does not hit the proverbial floor, repeatedly, then you do not know the true definition of the word beauty.

001. Neon Genesis Evangelion: The End of Evangelion

Anime has many faces and shows little in the way of inhibition. One face, the compelling and profound one, manifests itself in master works such as *Green Legend Ran, Now and Then Here and There, JinRoh*, and *Grave of the Fireflies*. *The End of Evangelion* dares to explore the root of humanity and divinity in a way so plausible, and at the same time horrible, that you can't help but be utterly riveted to it. It is so like man to try and be God, and somehow Gainax portray our undoing as a result in such a way that I often wonder if they know something we don't.

Best Animation Metropolis

A 15-second crowd scene took three months to animate—the entire film is a marvel to behold.



Best Story
Arjuna

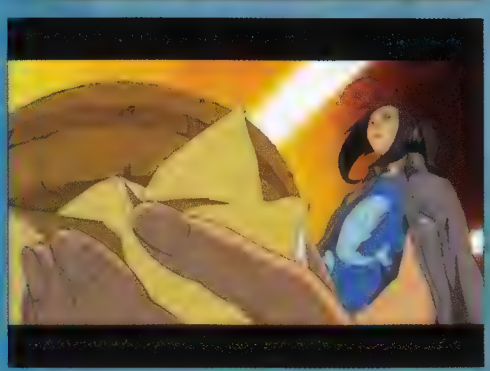
A story for the ages, so true to life, it's spooky. Everyone should see this anime.

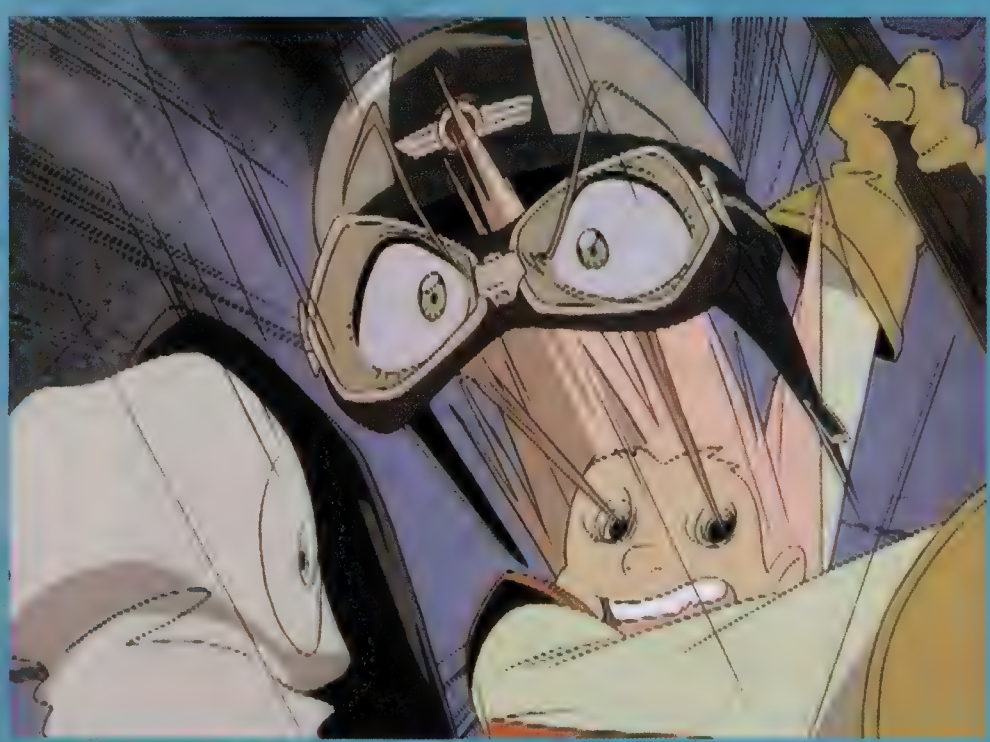
Best Comedy
FLCL

You'll laugh until you cry, and then laugh some more. There's only one way to watch *FLCL*: mouth agape.

Best Drama
Now and Then Here and There

One boy's plight and bravery in the face of turmoil, *Now and Then* took us on a journey none of us will ever forget.





Best Sci-Fi
End of Evangelion

studio: **manga entertainment** / rating: **13 & up**

You can't not be affected by it. The *End of Eva* will change you. The *Evangelion* experience on the whole was driven home with all the respect and majesty it deserved.

Best Horror
Doomed Megalopolis

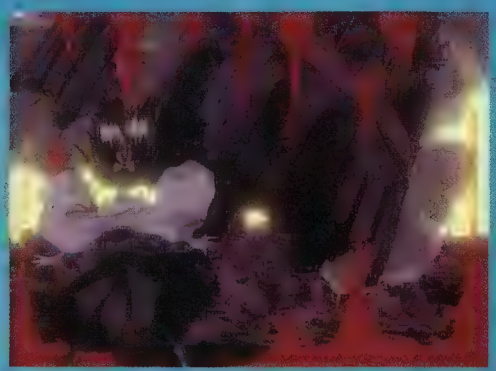
studio: **adv films** / rating: **12 & up**

The blackest evil, using a young woman as pawn, *Doomed Megalopolis* exhibits phenomenal character design, a story worthy of the big screen, and Kato, lord of the demons!

Best Action
Spriggan

studio: **adv films**/ rating: **17 & up**

Spriggan laid down the best scenes of pure uninterrupted action since *Akira*, in which the animation and cinematography are simply mind blowing.



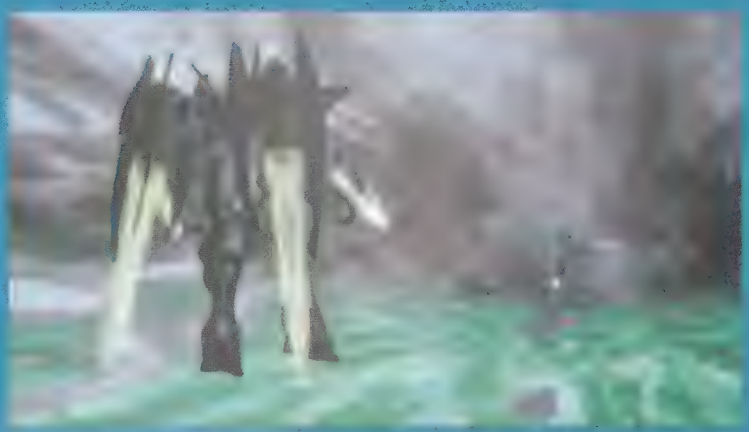
Best Original Animation Video (OAV) eX-Driver

studio: **media blasters** / rating: **13 & up**

Pure unadulterated fun, hot chicks, and fast cars brought to DVD as only AnimeWorks can. What a fantastic job they did with this series!

Best Mecha Vandread

The only things larger than the spectacular space mecha battles in *Vandread* are the practically legendary clashes between the sexes! Vandread is giant mecha fun with NG Eva-like depth of character.



Best Romance
Love Hina

A lil' comedy. A lil' fan service. A lil' girl-on-guy domestic violence. A lil' fan service. A lil' love. A lil' fan service. Love Hina is one of the most addictive romantic comedies ever.

Best Game Related
ZOE Dolores i

Following the lead of quality games based on films, game related anime got a booster shot in '02 with titles like *G Gundam* and our pick of the year, Zone of the Enders Dolores i.

Best DVD Box Set
Eva Perfect Collec.

Almost all of *Evangelion*...in a box. Need we say more?

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BEYOND REALITY
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SUNCOAST
The store for movie lovers.
BEST BUY
GameStop
fye
amazon.com
CARTOON NETWORK
BANDAI

STAFF TOP 10

Dave Halverson

001. End of Evangelion
002. FLCL
003. Berserk
004. Hellsing
005. Arjuna
006. Metropolis
007. Escaflowne The Movie
008. X TV
009. eX-Driver
010. Doomed Megalopolis

Christina Alexander

001. Spirited Away
002. Metropolis
003. The End of Evangelion
004. Vandread
005. Fruits Basket
006. Arjuna
007. Love Hina
008. X TV
009. Jin-Roh
010. Hand Maid May

Nelson Lui

001. Now and Then Here and There
002. Fruits Basket
003. Hellsing
004. eX-Driver
005. X TV
006. Vandread
007. Steel Angel Kurumi
008. Metropolis
009. FLCL
010. Arjuna

COMING IN 2003

...2002 was a banner year in the evolution of anime in America. On top of unforgettable movie events like *Metropolis*, *Escaflowne*, *JinRoh*, and *Spirited Away*, anime continued to seep into American homes through Fox Block, Adult Swim, and other cable outlets. Not that we like our anime laden with commercials and edits but, it's a step in the right direction. As great a year as it was however, '03 is already over flowing with possibility. ADV Films has *RahXephon* and *Lady Death*, AnimeWorks is readying *Samurai Deeper Kyo*, Manga's following *Blood* and *End of Evangelion* with *Read or Die*, Tokyo Pop's unleashing the TV hit *Initial D* and the amazing co-op madness of *Reign*, Pioneer's blessing us with *Chobits*, and Bandai's set to meld games and anime with *.hack//SIGN*, followed by the single most anticipated series perhaps ever; *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*. And that's just the tip of a very big iceberg...

pioneer chobits

bandai reign

Two assassins in search of the past.
To hear their name is to know fear;
To see their face is to know death.
NOIR
Le noir, ce mot désigne depuis une époque lointaine le nom du destin.
Les deux vierges règnent sur la mort
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The most anticipated anime release of 2003 is coming to DVD on February 18
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www.whatisnoir.com
www.advfilms.com

And you thought Two Face was two faced...

ARGENTO SOMA

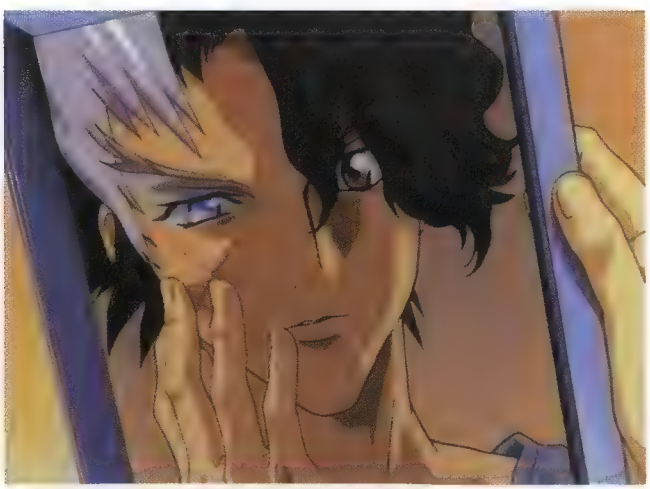
words dave halverson

Anime series are precarious little slices of animated life, as any number of early nuggets might lasso you into their allure, while inevitably, the real meat usually arrives (or perhaps not) months later. As it was with *Evangelion, Revolutionary Girl Utena, Hellsing, Blue Submarine Number 6, Outlaw Star, Berserk, Arjuna*, and select others, sometimes you can gauge when you're in for something truly spectacular from the outset: *Argentosoma* fits into that illustrious category.

Episode 1 begins innocently enough, with a college student, Takuto, frustrated that his girlfriend has more time for research than their relationship. Both Space Engineering majors, Takuto is the skeptical genius and Maki, the trusting aide. It's the year 2059; Maki's attention is diverted to a top-secret project being conducted by the faculty Frankenstein, Professor Noguchi, who is secretly attempting to resurrect a massive alien built from parts shot from the sky by Funeral, a special ops military unit that uses anti-alien mobile weapons called SARGs to subdue the massive Eva-like invaders that now plague the Earth. Noguchi lures Takuto into the research facility to help him breathe life into the monstrosity, using his love for Maki as bait, and together they resurrect the Iron Giant-like being, dubbed Frank, setting into motion a cataclysmic chain of events. Simultaneously, the military moves in and cuts power to the facility causing a massive power surge that sends the gentle giant into an epileptic-like frenzy. Everyone, sans Takuto, is killed...including Maki; Frank escapes, and that is where the story begins to take shape. Takuto's misguided hatred for Frank begins to swell out of control, ultimately producing a Tyler Durden-like alter-ego, driving the otherwise well-adjusted young man closer and closer to the fruition of a sinister plan.

Meanwhile, amidst a beautifully contrasted forest region, we meet Harriet, a young girl whose parents were slain by the hand of a "progressive alien"—those which absorb and reflect any attack—being raised by her grandfather, a towering man chiseled like a cross between Zangief and Sagat. Without giving too much away, Harriet becomes the story's Hogarth bonding with Frank just as Takuto finds a way into FUNERAL, who have begun using Frank as a weapon, controlling it through its affinity for Harriet. The layers between FUNERAL, Harriet, and Takuto form the catalyst for a story as rich as the show's amazing visuals; Argentosoma truly has it all.

If you're looking for a new series to love, there are many on the horizon, but only one that breaks convention (so far), and you're looking at it.



"...driving the otherwise well-adjusted young man closer and closer to the fruition of a sinister plan."

argentosoma vol.1

studio: **bandai entertainment** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **125 minutes**

play rating

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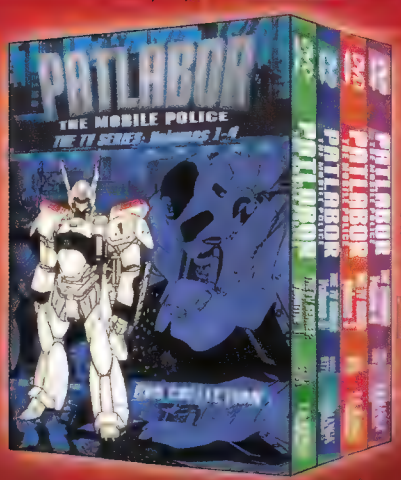

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Bad never looked so good

MAHOROMATIC

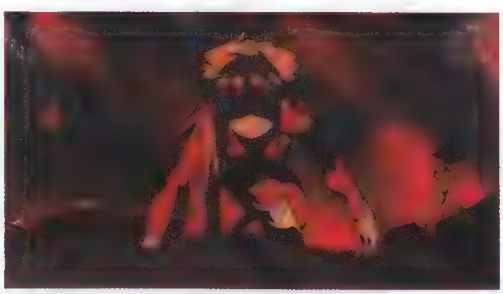
words dave halverson

There seems to be different layers at Gainax, not unlike a similar developer on the game side, Treasure (small shop, incredible work). At the top of the scale there's *Evangelion, Wings*, and *FLCL*, at the bottom *His and Her Circumstances* (sorry, but the thing is just sad), and now in the middle, their take on the whole android-maid/meat puppet genre, *Mahoromatic: Automatic Maiden*, which emits a vibe similar to *Hand Maid May, Steel Angel Kurumi, Amazing Nurse Nanako*, and *Saber Marionette J*. The usual rules apply: a core, undersexed, slightly prude student who suddenly finds himself in possession of a sexy new robo-toy that would like nothing more than to f*** his brains out; a hot bouncy android slave; and a group of friends completely smitten by the whole sorted affair. Fortunately that is where the similarities end and *Gainax*'s genius begins; Suguru's not nearly as dopey as his predecessors are, for one thing. He actually relishes the opportunity to bathe with Mahoro every night, nuzzled between her small but perky breasts (like all androids, Mahoro has little inhibition when it comes to pleasing her master) and fights beyond the nosebleeds quick enough to shed clothing by the second act. The show's big hook, though, is Mahoro's roots as a combat android. Not unlike a certain Nurse, Angel, and strain of Marionettes, she has immense power…

During the '80s the Earth was attacked by aliens, only we didn't know it because VESPER, the agency formed to deal with them, was so efficient at their disposal, thanks in no small part to Mahoro. VESPER is so appreciative that they allow her to live out her last year any way she chooses, thus providing the series' base ideal: her attempt to mend the damage that resulted in Suguru's current situation as a single orphaned male. Saying any more would spoil it, but trust me, it's a twist worthy of its own series.

The icing though, and it is thick and sugary, is Suguru's big-breasted homeroom teacher who, upon Mahoro's arrival, develops an insatiable desire to de-flower Suguru, and lets her boobs do the talking (and bouncing). Constantly pairing them against Mahoro's much smaller pair, full-blown titty-wars break out, rounding out the show's odd mix of sweet, sexy, and violent. Cosmetically, while the animation and character design isn't on par with *FLCL*'s (in my opinion), it's still completely excellent in every respect, far beyond the norm of most made-for-TV series. Mahoro only has a year to live—something tells me it's going to be eminently eventful.

"The icing though, and it is thick and sugary, is Suguru's big-breasted homeroom teacher"



mahoromatic vol.1

studio: **pioneer animation** / rating: **13 & up** / running time: **100 minutes**

play rating

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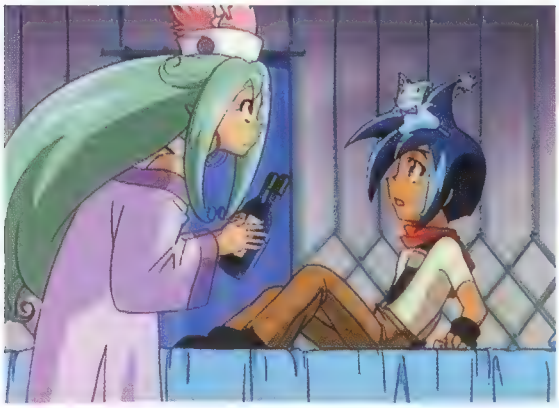
The West just got wilder

WILD ARMS

words dave halverson

Riding the seesaw of video-game anime can be tricky. You'd think that in the instance they take the time and trouble to cross over, they'd do so in league with a given game's strong points. Take *Powerstone* and *Mega Man* for instance. Both games feature brilliant Capcom character designs yet both anime resemble characters that look more like something you'd see from DIC. *Fatal Fury* and *Toshinden* faired only slightly better (thanks to Obari) and *Tekken*…well, let's just try to forget *Tekken*. On the respectable side, *Panzer* wasn't a total waste, *Sonic* was pretty cool (the Japanese one) and *Arc the Lad* wasn't a complete loss. But in a turn not unlike the recently lifted movie-to-game curse, a few games have spawned quality anime, namely *Zone of the Enders, SiN*, and *Final Fantasy*. That list may (and I emphasize may) soon become a little bit longer. Guess what? *Wild Arms* doesn't suck. It's not derived from the manga, or the game, but it is about ARMS (rare weapons possessing immense power) and it is a neo-western. ARMS extraordinaire Sheyenne Rainstorm is a 25-year-old gunslinger (and a horny one at that) trapped in the body of a five-year-old, so that's a good start. We join him as he's liberated from hyper sleep by the buff Dr. Kiel Aronnax, as the two make a break for freedom, embarking on a quest to find Sheyenne's real body and stay one step ahead of Loretta Oratorio and Crimson Noble Mirabelle (whom also happens to be a vampire capable of a special little transformation) a couple of hotty scam artists. So far ADV's five for five. Let's hope it doesn't pull an *Orphen* and start to yo-yo.

"Guess what? Wild Arms doesn't suck. It's not derived from the manga, or the game, but it is about ARMS."



wild arms vol.1

studio: **adv films** / rating: **15 & up** / running time: **125 minutes**

play rating

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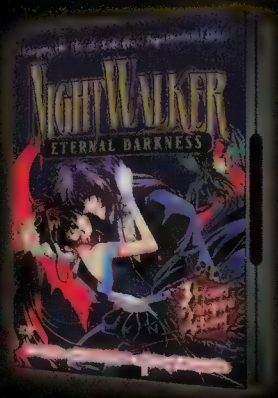
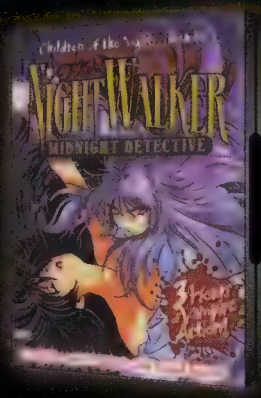


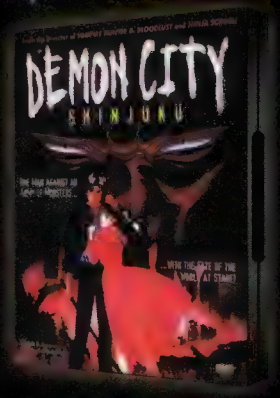
NIGHTWALKER: Eternal Darkness
Supernatural vampire action!



NIGHTWALKER: Midnight Detective
If you liked *Vampire Hunter D* and *Berserk*, you'll thrill to this vampire desperado.

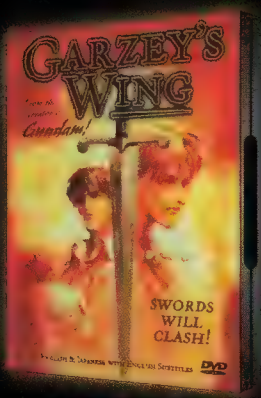
DARKSIDE BLUES
Apocalyptic urban wars from the creator of *Vampire Hunter D!*

THE COMPLETE SHAMANIC PRINCESS
Magical girls vs. monsters, from the director of *Outlaw Star!*



DEMON CITY SHINJUKU
The end of the world, from the producer of *Vampire Hunter D!*

THE VENUS WARS
Futuristic biker action in space!



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SOFTWARE SCULPTORS

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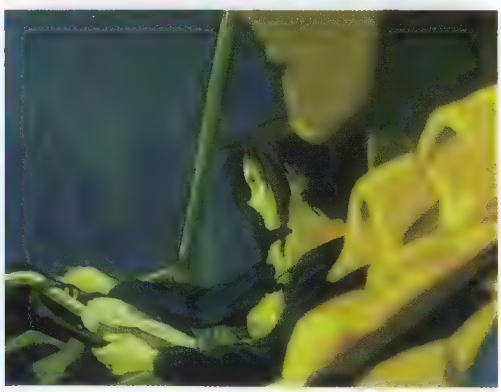
Melty Lancer The Animation

studio: bandai entertainment
rating: 13 & up
running time: 90 minutes

After a string of PS strategy/simulation games, the Melty Lancer crew are catching the anime wave on Bandai DVD — so let the bickering begin. If you thought this band of super girls and wonder women were dysfunctional before, wait until you get a load of their new commanding officer—asshole extraordinaire Colonel Collins, a lovely gentleman the Global Police Organization dug out of deep freeze to help clean up their sagging reputation with the Galaxy Federation...by taking over the Melty Lancers. But I digress. Terraforming has reached an all time high; in fact, it's possible to render a dead planet's atmosphere inhabitable via a single tiny capsule. As a result, two problems loom on the immediate horizon: Vanessar, a gang of maniacal University Students, are causing a planet-modification robot disguised as a hurling meteor to collide with Earth and commence illegal terra forming. Meanwhile, The Defiant, another rebel band, has begun hijacking the DNA of endangered species, likely to hatch a plot using the Genesis capsules, which they've liberated from the Government. After the half-wit aide assigned to rounding up the team gets his stuff together, Sylvia, Angela, and the rest of the gang commence laying the magic and mayhem down in a tirade of sci-fi goodness that. Certainly one of the hottest new series of the new year.

DAVE HALVERSON

play rating



Bounty Dog

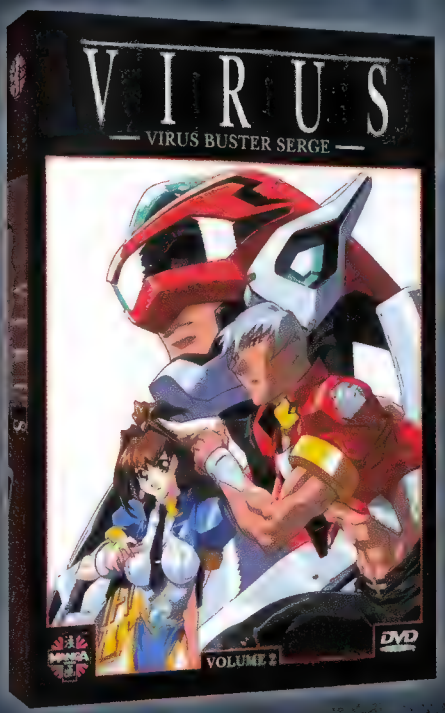
studio: manga entertainment
rating: 17 & up
running time: 60 minutes

If you haven't seen *Bounty Dog* and like intelligent sci-fi, now's the time to sign up. The kind of story we pine for but never get in live-action, *Bounty Dog* opens with a shuttle of tourists making their ascent to the moon, now colonized under domes, home to towering cities and seemingly utopian ideals. But like something you might find in a Kubrick screenplay, a cosmic calamity is silently brewing under the surface. Yoshyuki has come to the planet as part of the Bounty Dog Investigation unit, commissioned as weapon inspectors during a time of political unrest. On board the shuttle, he speaks to his perished love of their upcoming reunion as if she was there with him. Dying in his grasp she uttered, "I'll see you in five years, on the moon," right before his arm became severed from his body by falling glass, then replaced by a cybernetic limb before he regained consciousness. If he only new humanity dangles, as the core of the moon — which turns out to be an observation satellite launched to observe life on Earth —begins to awaken. Revelations are quick and relentless as the story intersects and twists to the bittersweet end. While the transfer isn't all that crisp, the show's pale pallet and bleak hues don't rely on flash, but rather a high level of detail, a great story, and a Mecha Designer assist from none other than Masamune Shirow.

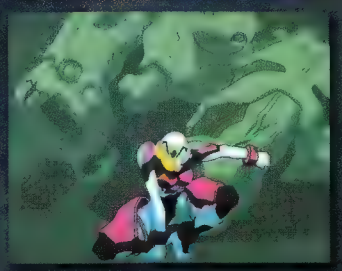
DAVE HALVERSON

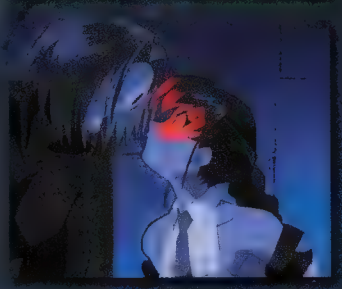
play rating

FEBRUARY ANIME ACTION!



VIRUS
VIRUS BUSTER SERGE — VOLUME 2





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play MEDIA

blue crush

●●●◐○

universal / rated pg-13

The fact that Grazer and company rolled out a watchable rags-to-riches fable is no big surprise; the shocker is that they were able to sculpt it around a bona fide surf flick—not an easy thing to do. Intersecting the rigors of professional sports, producers often soar over the top with laughable lingo and ass casting. But *Blue Crush* nails it: the people, the places, the culture, and especially the waves. Living vicariously between skate parks in the late '80s (yeah, we had them: Upland, Montebello, Skatercross, and Marina Del-Ray), I've seen my share of hoot-tastic surf cinema, and this water work, well, it's the best ever. Kate Bosworth is the real thing too, and when it comes to Mrs. Rodriguez, in my eyes she can do no wrong. Such a natural, raw talent, she adds a layer to everything she's in. This DVD comes packed with awesome features including the secrets behind the filming, a look inside the world of pro surfing, a making-of, and much more. Its most amazing feat, however, is that it centers around three beauties that live in bikinis and never gets gratuitous. Much respect to Mr. Grazer for his inspired, under-appreciated slice of surfing life. *-Dave Halverson*

ghost ship

●●○○○

warner bros. / rated r

Sea Evil? All I see are crash test actors. If you've seen one Dark Castle production (*Thirteen Ghosts, House on Haunted Hill*), I'm afraid you've seen them all. Their hook is to give horror a gleam, to polish it up with computer-generated goodness to induce scenes of explicit fright. Unfortunately, they end up looking more like scenes of explicit CG. That said, this film does have its merits. What begins as a "these damn ghosts just won't die!" story actually escalates due to a clever plot twist and ends up halfway-decen. We know Margulies is going to live, and besides her, don't care who dies; in fact I found myself more interested in how, than if. They may as well flash on the screen "this actor is going to die now," the domino deaths are so predictable, but hey, we're here to see blood, right, so what of it? Well, you'll get buckets. It's sad where horror has gone these days: often the commercials are better than the film. If Rob Zombie can't save us (release it already!), maybe nobody can; in the meantime consult *The Ring* for your DVD chills. My question is, where's the next *Exorcist, Rosemary's Baby, Night of the Living Dead*, or *Hellraiser* (hey, the first one was great) going to come from? Not these guys. I will say this though, the dismemberment scene in this one is a slice of pure movie magic, and the special features are impressive. Hey, I'm a sucker for lenticular covers; I have to justify it somehow. *-Dave Halverson*

the four feathers

●●●●○

paramount / rated pg-13

Adapted from the 1901 book by A.E.W. Mason, *The Four Feathers* tells a story of honor, love and adventure. The year is 1884 and Harry Feversham (played by Heath Ledger) is called to active duty for the British Army. Not wanting to leave his fiancé (Kate Hudson), he resigns his commission and is branded a coward. When confronted by three of his friends and his fiancé, he is presented with four feathers — symbolizing his weakness. Wanting to do the right thing, Harry embarks on a personal quest of redemption. Even though the story does drag a bit in some parts, director Shekhar Kapur (*Elizabeth*) still manages to pull off the story in epic fashion, especially the battle sequences, which are visually spectacular. Overall, the cast is excellent, but the true star of the film is Djimon Hounsou. His performance as Abou is just incredible.
This Special Collector's Edition of *The Four Feathers* is packed with great features including a great commentary by director Shekhar Kapur and a cool "Making of" featurette. In addition, there are great documentaries that center on the historical and cultural contexts of the story. Enhanced for 16:9 televisions, the film transfer is absolutely brilliant. The sound and musical score is also top-notch. The film is presented in Dolby Digital 5.1. *-Tom Ham*

x-men 1.5

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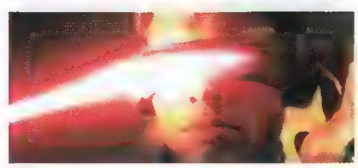
20th century fox / rated pg-13

With *X2* coming in just a matter of months, 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment and director Bryan Singer thought you'd like to check out the original *X-Men* just one more time. X-Men 1.5 is truly for the die-hard fan. For those of you unfamiliar, X-Men is based on Stan Lee's Marvel comic book series, telling the story of Professor Xavier and his gifted X-Men. Featuring an all-star cast including Academy Award winner Halle Barry, the X-Men battle it out against Magneto (Ian McKellan) and his fellow evil mutants. But the coolest aspect of X-Men was how the superheroes came to life on screen. It made you believe these mutants actually exist. Watching Mystique change from one form to another was pretty damn cool. Although the movie didn't win any major awards, it still manages to deliver a lot of fun.
This double disc set is absolutely packed with great never-before-seen features. Our favorite feature is a branched viewing mode. This allowed us to check out behind-the-scene commentary about specific scenes in the movie. There were a host of deleted scenes as well (not seen on the original DVD). The commentary by Bryan Singer, Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellan and Hugh Jackman is very good, and at times extremely funny. The audition videos of some of the actors are also quite entertaining. From an audio standpoint, X-Men 1.5 kicks ass. Not only do you have a Dolby Digital track, there is a DTS 5.1 as well. *-Tom Ham*



femme fatale

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warner bros. / rated r

Femme Fatale is intoxicating, calculated filmmaking that discards boring convention for delicious style. It deceives and confuses, delighting in throwing us little hints along the way that reveal a possible conclusion to its shifting mysteries. It looks like a film that could have existed in the '70s, sensual and content to take its time in unraveling.
The movie contains very little dialogue, relying on mood and the thrill of the

Eminem stars as Rabbit in Curtis Hanson's gripping *8 Mile*

chase. In the opening half hour, we are introduced to the sultry Laure Ash (Rebecca Rominn-Stamos) as she erotically seduces a wildly sexy super model into dropping her cloak of diamonds on the bathroom floor of the Palais du Cinema. Things don't go quite as planned, and the team of thiefs supporting Laure's efforts end up landing in a world of double-crossing hurt. Up to this point, we're still not sure what has happened and where the film is taking us, which is part of its pleasure. Brian De Palma commands his camera and paints his scenes with distinct, bold appeal, telling a story through the images and actions of the characters far more than the words that exist between them. Stamos can be a cold stiff in a steamy role, but Femme Fatale has enough sultry support to keep the tempature sizling. *-Brady Fiechter*

8 mile

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universal / rated r

Think what you will of Eminem's caustic, venomous style of hip hop, but there's no denying his bold talent and brilliant ability to raise the hands of even the most offended. In his acting debut, Eminem brings the charge of his music and its gritty story to the bigscreen, playing the lead roll with suprising nuance and emotional heft. 8 Mile tellls the story of a white rapper, Rabbit, growing up in the slum of Detroit, where the grown men live with their parents and dream daily of making it big as performers. Even outside the rusty factory where Rabbit works, street poetry sessions break out, where everyone freestyles for pride and a sense of superiority. The gang struggles that occur in 8 Mile are especially interesting and unusual in that there's no fight over racial matters, but over the competitive dignity of their career passions and the mire of their unfortunate surroundings. These kids talk the harsh talk but expose an emotional softness and yearning for life. All this plays out with good emotional heft, even when 8 Mile plays through manufactured, convenient drama, going the way of genre convention: artist searches for success, flirts with wild love, holds on to shaky friendships, fails constantly before the big hit. But the strength of the lead performances—Cheddar is keenly played by the talented Evan Jones— and Eminem's character's apparant parrallels to the rapper's personal life struggles is compelling, even if the cheerless film let's us down with no ending payoff. *-Brady Fiechter*

virgin

30 seconds to mars

30 seconds to mars

Prog for the new millennium. What bands like Rush and Dream Theatre helped cultivate, 30 Seconds to Mars now reiterate to a generation doused in too much pop gleam and not enough substance. And the fact that it comes with a celebrity toe tag (long live the new Jordan Catalano) only makes it that much more indicative of this crazy era in music. The groundswell of support around 3STM is well-founded. Not only are they Puddle of Mudd deep and talented, they're also excellent showmen, giving them old school rockstar cred right off the bat. They don't wear street clothes, but they're not glammed out either; they look like rockstars. The music is what matters, though, and the debut is a powerful experience that fits the band's hyper-cool mantra (love the Glyph) and symbolic, metaphoric lyrics. The debut is blissful nearly the whole way through. With bands like Pink Floyd, Zeppelin, Rush, Alice Cooper, and Kiss as their influences, it's no wonder the sound is so nuanced. 3TSM sound like a band on their fifth album, not their first. The sound…smart crunchy riffs with a thick electric undercurrent interlaced with the subtlety of a space opera; it's tight, clean, cutting, and the vocals — perfectly laid. Rock may not be dead after all.
–Dave Halverson

def jam

saliva

back into your system

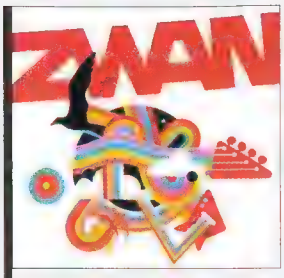
On their third, most polished and professionally wound collection of glistening rock, Saliva are showing signs of a lasting band, even if their brand of booming sonics, spoken rage and melodic layering does little to step outside the boundaries of the masses. What these earnest boys from Memphis lack in resonance they make up for in infectious, tuneful song writing—the kind of rock that hits hard while maintaining a sing-along flow. The rap-metal track "Raise Up" simply thumps with the best of them, and "Separated Self" bumps and grinds with an acoustic suspension, but the album's highlights stem from the pure radio pleasure of "Always" and "Pride." When they miss, they miss big—the sappy power ballad "Rest in Pieces" is an obligatory shame—yet Saliva's refreshing focus on crafting a sharp piece of rock over angry strain keeps *Back In Your System* a consistently reliable listen.
–Brady Fiechter

universal

ra

from one

As the first track on Ra's debut, From One, transitions from a head-banging funk, melting seamlessly into its title track chops, you know you're onto something special. If this is the bait, imagine how sweet the sound. The trip only gets better. Ra is a rare find; very, very rare. The guitars hit you over the head but it feels so damn good you can't turn it up loud enough; thick, bludgeoning even, but layered with so many changes and riding on such thick, delicious bass, it's intoxicating. And when they come down for power ballads like On My Side and Sky, it feels something like the modern equivalent of Journey or Boston, only without the cornball lyrics and goodie-two-shoes-sheen; this so much better, so much meatier, and Sahaj Ticotin's searing vocal range creates a diverse atmosphere. So what if their first video (a performance piece that looks like it was shot after hours at The Starwood back in '78) blows? They're a producer away from a full-blown invasion.
–Dave Halverson



warner bros.

zwan

sister mary of the sea

After The Smashing Pumpkins became a little too self important and drained their songwriting of the progressive energy that powered their great early work, the curtain fell permanantly, leaving frontman Billy Corgan time to forge a new path—sort of. His newest project, Zwan, comprised of Pumpkins drummer Jimmy Chamberlan and various other heavy hitters from past accomplished bands, rides on early Pumpkin flavor while pulling from modern expectations. Corgan holds on to his penchant for thick, fuzzy guitars and a tortured artist's ferocity of emotion, but the songs take on a fuller, more immediately inviting shape. With his voice working with the music more than around it, Corgan has softened his wine and let more background melody play off the strengths of the superb song crafting. Zwan don't surprise as much as satisfy.
–Brady Fiechter

words terence malik

If you think that S-Video and Component offer the best available gaming image, there's a whole new world out there waiting to be discovered. It's called progressive scan.

what is it?

In order to understand progressive scan and its benefits, it is first necessary to explain the way images have been produced on standard television sets all these years. When broadcast standards were formulated in the 1930's, it was decided that each frame (30 frames per second equals one second of video) would be split into two separate fields in order to conserve bandwidth. Each field represents half of the video image, the top field containing all the odd numbered scan lines and the bottom one the even numbered scan lines. When these two fields are combined and flickered 60 times per second, the illusion is created of a single moving image because of a characteristic in the human mind called persistence of vision. This method of video reproduction is known as interlaced video, and it's been the standard since the 1930's.

Progressive scanning does something very simple. Basically, it shows both fields at the same time. Instead of having two separate interlaced images, there is one progressively scanned image. The immediate advantages are increased brightness and greater horizontal detail, and the subliminally perceptible flicker of interlaced video is gone.

The difference in image quality between interlaced and progressive scan is nothing short of astounding when it comes to gaming. Images look as if they are painted on the screen, the color rendition is simply stunning, and there are no scan lines, making for an incredibly stable and bright image. To play a game in progressive scan is to play a game exactly the way its designers intended.

how can I see it?

All current game systems are capable of progressive scan, and while nearly every Gamecube and Xbox game supports it, only a handful of PS2 titles do. In each case, a component video cable is required to view the enhanced image. Xbox and PS2 component cables are readily available, but as of press, the only way to get component cables for the Gamecube is to order them directly from Nintendo's website. Imports are available, but you'll pay a premium, and you'll probably still have to order them.

The next and most important requirement for viewing progressive scan games is a high definition television. Again, a little explanation is required. A high definition set is one that can display the three different HD standards: 480p, 720p, and 1080i. 480p is comprised of 480 progressively scanned lines, as opposed to the standard television signal, which is 480 interlaced lines (480i). 720p is self explanatory, as is 1080i, the highest image quality currently available. Nearly every game that supports progressive scan does so in 480p, while a handful use 720p, and Dragon's Lair 3D on Xbox is the only game that supports the full resolution of 1080i. Not all high definition sets support 720p natively, but they will down-convert a 720p image to 480p, so there are no compatibility issues.

There are many factors to consider when looking for an HD set. The first is aspect ratio, or the shape of the screen, and there are two choices: 4:3 and 16:9. A 4:3 set is the standard, nearly square, television, while a 16:9 set is widescreen. Movie lovers will of course want a 16:9 set, as it will allow movies to be shown with little or no letterboxing of the image. While a few games like Star Fox Adventures and Panzer Dragoon Orta support widescreen modes, most don't, and if gaming is your primary concern, then a 4:3 set is the best bet, especially as they cost a bit less. Just keep in mind that the ever-increasing availability of high definition television programming (which is all widescreen) might make a 4:3 set less attractive as a long term solution. And perhaps by the time the next generation of gaming hardware is released, the majority of games will offer widescreen modes. For gamers leaning toward a widescreen set, be aware that you will be the victim of reverse letterboxing, as non-widescreen games will not fill the screen and there will be black bars to the left and right of the image. All HD sets offer the ability to horizontally stretch the image to fill the screen, but this is a rather inelegant and distracting option.

The second consideration when buying a high definition set is display type, and this is largely a matter of cost. The most economical route is the trusted direct view or CRT set. These are the heavy vacuum tubes that we've been enjoying since the beginning of television. This is a very mature technology, and as such, direct view sets offer the most bang for the buck. A standard 32" 4:3 HD set can cost less than $800, while a similarly sized 16:9 in general costs only a few hundred more, topping out at around $2500 for a 36" model. One step up the ladder takes us to CRT-based rear projection sets. If size is your concern, then this is the way to go. A decent 50" widescreen rear projection set costs around $3000, but there is a price to be paid. Viewing angle is important in rear projection sets, as the image dims as you move above and to the left and right of the screen. Also, there is the possibility of static images burning into the screen, though it would take many, many hours for this to take occur. Next up are plasma displays. These flat beauties start at around $5000 for a 32" model, and go all the way into the five figures for the 50" monsters. The main advantages of a plasma set are style and space savings, as they can be easily hung on a wall. The disadvantages are cost, inferior black level reproduction when compared to direct view sets, and the possibility of static image burn-in.

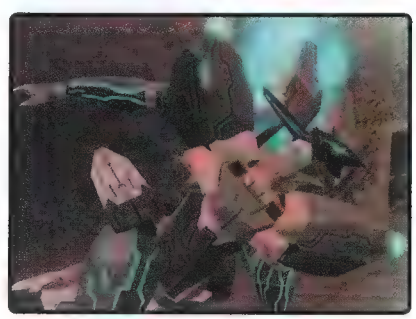
One of the newer technologies to emerge in the last few years is called DLP, or digital light projection, and these currently expensive sets offer terrific picture quality and large screen sizes. Resembling standard rear projection televisions, DLP sets are much thinner and offer a more uniform image and no possibility of burn-in. They start at around $5000.

There are a couple of other options for high definition gaming, but both are impractical. One is high definition LCD monitors, but these are simply too expensive for the size of screen you are getting, and the second is front projection. Both LCD- and CRT-based, front projection units require dim rooms and separate screens (or a white wall) to project their images onto, making them practical only for serious home theater use.

is it worth it?

I cannot overstate the difference in image quality between interlaced and progressive scan video. The first time I played Phantasy Star Online in progressive scan mode, my jaw literally hit the floor. Distant detail sparkled, and the color became so vibrant and rich, it nearly defied belief. Side by side comparisons revealed a huge increase in overall brightness as well. The difference was at least as great as that between RF and S-Video, probably even more so. If image quality is important to you, then a high definition set is a must. And once you've taken the plunge, you can not only enjoy a greatly enhanced gaming experience, but you'll also be ready to enjoy high definition programming and enhanced DVD image quality as well. Currently, nearly every HD set requires a external converter to receive high definition television programming, either off the air or through some cable and satellite providers, but in the near future, every set will have built in converters, and programming will be more extensive and widely available. And to enjoy progressive scan DVDs, you need to buy a new player capable of outputting the appropriate signal. Unfortunately, neither the PS2 nor the Xbox can produce a progressive DVD image, but capable DVD players can be found for as little $150.

interlace versus progressive scan



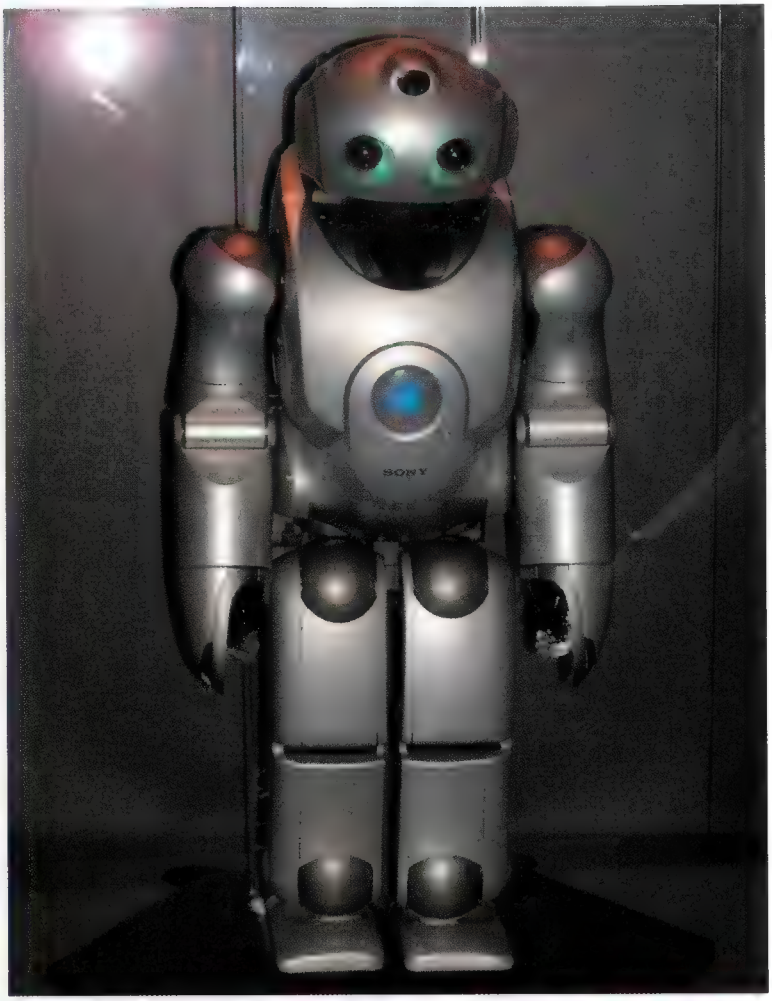
In this exaggerated visual comparison, I can more easily point out the differences between interlaced and progressive scan images. A normal interlaced television signal is comprised of two quickly alternating images or fields which combine to form a single moving picture. A progressive scan presents both fields simultaneously. You will see an picture that is brighter, more detailed, more stable, and far richer in color.

turn on the fun

Nearly every Gamecube game supports progressive scan. To activate it, simply hold down the "B" button during the Gamecube start up sequence. For Xbox owners, who also have the benefit of nearly ubiquitous progressive game support, it is necessary to enter the video options menu on the Xbox dashboard and turn on the various (480p, 720p, 1080i) high definition modes. Unfortunately PS2 owners only have a few progressive scan games to choose from like SOCOM and NBA Live 2003. Unlike the standardized settings for the GC and Xbox, the PS2's progressive scan mode is activated differently depending on the game.

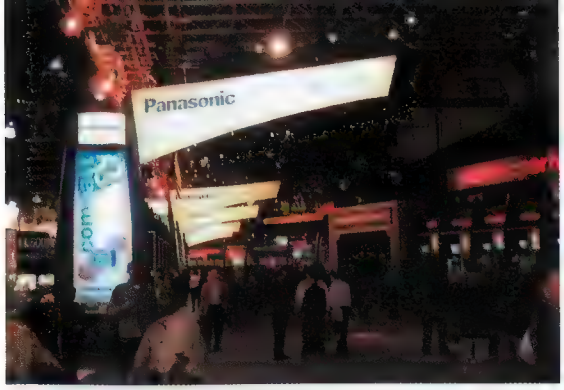
CES 2003

words and photos by tom ham



What do you get when you throw more than 100,000 gamblers and salespeople into a week of wild parties? If you guessed Las Vegas, you're only half right. Welcome to the 2003 Consumer Electronics Show, where the creators of the latest and greatest gadgets and technology roll the dice and hope that their products will become tomorrow's next big thing. Held each January, CES is the premier showcase for every possible consumer electronic device imaginable-from microwaves and car stereos to digital cameras and DVD players—all on a blister-inducing one-million-plus square feet of bleeping and blaring floor space.

"Consumer electronics continue to capture the imagination and meet the needs of the American consumer," said CEA President and CEO Gary Shapiro. "From digital video to gaming, from wireless to in-car electronics, from home networking to digital imaging, our industry's products provide consumers with instant access to information and entertainment and enable them to stay connected, making the world a better place." Amen to that. The big trend at CES this year was portability and video-on-the-go. Multi-functional camcorders and sleeker, slimmer digital cameras were popular on the show floor in addition to the latest HDTV, plasma and LCD televisions. Still, we here at **play** thought to keep your bank account in mind (whatever) while scouring the booths at this year's show; accordingly, our top five CES finds cover the gamut, from home audio and portable video to digital imaging and home automation. Let the drooling begin.



Best of CES 2003

Our favorite gadget of the show by far solves one of the digital age's nagging problems: namely, how to record video without using traditional recording media. Wouldn't it be great to be able to record onto a hard drive and then download it later? Enter Samsung's versatile Gadget camcorder. Aptly named, this device allows users to store over 30 hours of MP3s, thousands of digital still images or up to an hour and a half worth of MPEG-4 video – all on its internal 2GB hard drive. The Gadget also features a USB 2 port that allows for incredibly fast downloads of your audio and video content. There is also Memory Stick slot for your digital images. Measuring at a mere 2.48 inches wide and 4.06 inches high, this little device has cool written all over it. The truly remarkable Gadget will be available in May and will retail for $499.

Next up is a small package with big vision: the DZMV380A, the world's first fully functional MegaPixel DVD camcorder, from Hitachi. Utilizing a new slimmer design (40 percent smaller than most second-generation camcorders), the DZMV380A not only can handle DVD-RAM and DVD-R recording, you can use it take high-quality digital pictures as well. With the built-in 2.5" LCD screen, you can see thumbnail images of your recorded content so you'll know exactly where to cut, edit and fade-in the action. When you use a DVD-RAM disc, you can edit your movies in the camera itself. Not only can you reorder scenes but you can also add special transition effects. But what's really wicked about this camcorder is that you can download your content via the USB 2.0 to your PC, then do whatever you want to it with the included software, then upload it back to your camera where you can burn it onto a DVD-R disc, the format that will play back in most DVD players and DVD-ROM drives. This little bad boy will be available second quarter 2003 and will retail for $1,099.95.

New products for home audio enthusiasts were rampant at this year's CES, but none held a candle to Pioneer's revolutionary PDSP-1, the world's first digital sound projector. What does it do? Imagine a single-source speaker panel that delivers discreet 5.1 channel surround sound audio with more than 500 watts of power; we're still grinning from our exclusive demo. Using a multi-channel acoustic calibration system, the PDSP-1 is able to bounce sound with tightly focused beams of sound. Imagine 254 small speakers, each with a specific role in the creation of 5.1 surround sound. When these beams of sound are distributed in a room (bouncing off walls and ceilings) you can actually hear the rear channels behind you. The kicker is, there are no speakers there! In addition to DVD video, the PDSP-1 worked flawlessly with present CD technology as well as DVD-Audio and Super Audio CDs. The unit will be available this month and will retail for a measly $40,000. We already have ours on layaway.

If you're into home theatre like we are, it's safe to assume that you have several audio and video components from various manufacturers. So in all likelihood you have four or more remotes laying around the coffee table. What do you do? Enter the new iPronto TSi6400 from Philips. Combining audio/video, home automation and home network control, this is a truly a gift from the remote control gods. This lightweight gem not only will control all of your home theater components, it will also dim your lights, check your security cameras, check the status of your home network, adjust climate controls and any other IR/RF/Ethernet home applications you see fit. The iPronto TSi6400 is a learning device, which means it is fully customizable. In addition to touch screen capabilities, you can use a built-in stylus to navigate around the 6.4" high-resolution LCD color screen. You can even have up to four separate windows of information at one time. And speaking of information, suppose you're watching a DVD and you want to know what other movies a particular star has been in. No problem. With the built-in Electronic Programming Guide with Media Selection, you can wirelessly access the Internet and look up the information. And since it has built-in WiFi technology (which means it's "always on"), the TSi6400 can download new features and software updates as needed. And with the built-in stereo speakers you can even listen to MP3s. Available now, the iPronto TSi6400 retails for $1,699.00.

And finally, each CES has one ridiculously priced item that we'd want in our house right now, and this year it's Swans Speaker System's new super high-end speaker system, the Swans 2.2, available at a store near you. Standing over 6'8" tall, the sound quality was astounding. We were truly mesmerized. How much you ask? How does $68,000-a-pair sound? Yeah right!

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